

■ ENVIRONMENT

Waste initiatives a shambles with almost R1bn squandered

OPEN letter to the Cleansing and Solid Waste Unit of eThekweni Municipality, DSW.

As we approach the Christmas holidays in our beautiful Durban, a time for relaxation, family reunions and excess, one issue weighs heavy on my mind, an issue that will be magnified many times over and that says a lot about who we are!

This issue, my dear friends, is waste – by looking through your waste I will be able to deduce whether you are wealthy or poor; how many children you have and whether they are boys or girls; I will know where you do your shopping and what you eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner; and I will even get a sense of what extracurricular activities you and your family enjoy... I might even learn your bank account details! Our waste is what defines us at a personal and household level.

At municipal level what we do with our waste also says a lot about us, our administration and our values!

Waste is a social construct – it does not exist in itself, it is made entirely by us! What ends up being waste is a construct of our values, our behaviour, our administration and our efficiency.

If we have waste that goes to landfill this signals a failure along the value chain of waste management.

In eThekweni over the past 10 years waste management has not been perfect, but it at least had the pillar stones

of what has been achieved globally in the Zero Waste movement. Cities like San Francisco have achieved diversion from landfill and recycling rates up to 80% within relatively short timeframes by implementing these simple and effective approaches to waste.

These include the separation at source of organic, recyclable and non-recyclable waste – in Durban simply known as blue-bag, orange bag, clear bag and black bag waste. As long as these are separated at source and transported and dealt with in an environmentally sound manner we can begin to replicate the global efforts to zero waste!

This is supported by waste pickers who collect recyclables every morning from street verges. In addition, the Mariannahill Landfill site had a fully functional material recovery facility employing two shifts operating over 24 hours to recover recyclable materials. All of this is underpinned by our Waste Act and separation at source regulations which direct municipalities to recycle more and support the informal economy!

So what is the issue that weighs heavily on my mind? The total and farcical collapse of this simple system in Durban because of alleged tender irregularities, municipal mismanagement at Durban Solid Waste that acts unilaterally and whose actions fly in the face of people on the ground who



Litter left behind by revellers on a Durban beachfront.

make a daily effort to separate waste at source in their homes and places of work.

As I write this a municipal dump truck has collected my pre-sorted and separated waste from the verge, in their multi-coloured bags, all mixed up into the back of the dump truck, on the way to Shongweni landfill where it will impact the good people of Kwa-Ndengezi and Hillcrest through the

stench of hydrogen sulphide permeating into their homes over Christmas – this is a systems failure of modern waste management!

To add insult to injury we as residents are being fleeced because if you look at your utility bill carefully there is a cost at the end which states “Domestic Refuse – Units”. For houses valued below R1 million there is a levy of R79.49 + VAT. For households above

R1m there is an additional levy of R174.85 + VAT. When former municipal manager Mike Sutcliffe introduced the additional levy we welcomed it for we believed this money would be ring-fenced for separation at source, link waste management with waste pickers and through this drive a Zero Waste agenda.

According to Census 2011, there were 956 713 households in eThekweni. If we estimate that 60 000 of these households paid the levy of R100 over the past 10 years – calculating a conservative average amount of R100 a month over the past 10 years – the income eThekweni would have generated from this tax would be close to R1 billion over the past 10 years. And this is only for households valued over R1m.

But instead the money has been squandered by the city, the waste is all dumped in one hole and waste pickers have no livelihood to support themselves and their families, they have been pushed out of the economy.

For every step taken to advance and improve the waste system in the past years, now we seem to have taken more steps back. As people we have dug into limited resources to make contributions for the system to function efficiently, and the current outcomes are not what we desire at all.

BOBBY PEEK
groundWork