

COMMENT

LANDFILL CRISIS BEFORE THE HIGH COURT

MUSA CHAMANE

THE case against Msunduzi municipality on the management of the New England Landfill in Pietermaritzburg has finally reached the high court, thanks to the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) formal investigation into human rights and dignity impacts because of the dump.

The matter is set down in the Pietermaritzburg High Court for hearing today. This comes after complaints levelled by city residents over fires that have been occurring regularly at the landfill because of poor site management. In April last year, the whole of Pietermaritzburg city was engulfed in smoke from the landfill fires which lasted for more than three days.

As a result, schools temporarily shut down for days, and residents became sick from the toxic smoke from the fires. The SAHRC subsequently received a number of complaints from Pietermaritzburg residents, and a protest was held near the site with a petition against the dump which was also handed over to the commission.

In September last year groundWork, the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), Shepstone and Wylie, and some of the affected residents met with the commission to provide more information and insight on the issue.

The commission was very concerned that official compliance directives that were issued by the Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs were ignored in their efforts to intervene.

The case could set a precedent for so many of the poorly managed landfill sites that exist in our country. There are more than 1000 licensed waste disposal sites across South Africa, the majority of which are poorly managed.

We are also pleased that the municipality is planning to acquire a new site and close the current one.

However, we hope that the new site will include a materials recovery facility (MRF). Waste pickers who drive recycling and materials recovery in South Africa have previously protested, demanding the construction of such a facility which was intended to be funded by Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (Cogta) in 2014.

Despite funding being made available, the Msunduzi municipality refused to build it as a result of incompetence and corruption. The money went back to Cogta.

The MRF was meant to create an enabling and safe environment for waste pickers, and also create an effective recycling system for the city, but that was all denied by Msunduzi Local Municipality without any reason.

Ideally, even the current site needs to be converted to a waste transfer station receiving only recyclable waste materials, enabling an aggressive recycling and separation-at-source-of-waste system from residents and business that could lead to zero waste going to landfill. This is a progressive way of dealing with waste.

Nationally, more than 90 000 waste pickers derive their daily livelihoods from waste. The installation of MRFs can facilitate the integration of informal waste pickers into the municipal waste management system.

An enabling environment should be created for them to operate so that an economy based on waste emerges.

It is unacceptable that vast tracts of land are used for archaic methods of waste burial without coming up with viable alternatives to manage waste. Zero waste is the only solution.

Chamane is a waste campaign manager at groundWork, Friends of the Earth SA