

# City admits billing bungle

## Extra payment office to be set up in Midlands Mall

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AT last.

The City's finance unit yesterday acknowledged that there are indeed problems within the billing department that need urgent attention.

And in a move that many residents will be happy about, they announced plans to open a payment office at the Liberty Midlands Mall to help residents who battle to get to their offices in town because of a lack of parking there.

The finance team, led by the acting chief financial officer Dudu Ndlovu-Gambu, was responding to questions by members of the municipal public accounts committee (Mpac) at City Hall yesterday.

With regards to the front desk staff, Ndlovu-Gambu acknowledged the department was not performing well.

"It is being scrutinised to ensure that our staff are treating people well and are able to resolve the queries that are brought by the customers."

She said there was also a challenge of long-outstanding disputes that had not been resolved and there was a discussion about resuscitating the dispute resolution committee.

"If you are not sorting out those disputes, people are not going to be able to come and pay.

"With respects to the billing system, we have engaged the internal audit unit so they can come in and assist us to ensure that our accounts are validated and whatever is being billed to customers is correct," said Ndlovu-Gambu.

The manager for budget implementation, Sifiso Khoza, said the failure to update the names of the owners of properties which have been transferred was crippling revenue collection.

"The name changes are so simple and we can do it on our system but there is [a] huge backlog of about two years. That is a revenue loss for the municipal-

ity because we are not billing the correct person. ... Some owners are not coming forward to say they are not receiving the bill," he said.

He said the Department of Public Works had engaged the municipality to settle the debt owed by the provincial government departments but at times found that the affected properties had already been transferred to the municipality, but that was never recorded on the system, so the City still billed the department.

Councillors expressed concerns over the City's high debtor's book as well as the amount of water and electricity lost through non-payment, theft and lack of maintenance.

They said the first step to improving the revenue collection rate was to deal with the internal problems, as customers were complaining about the billing system and the service at the payment centres.

"We must make sure that our systems are in order so that the customers are billed correctly for water and electricity," said ANC councillor Sandile Ngubane.

He said the municipality should also be going after businesses that were defaulting because they had no excuse for not paying.

Councillor Manqoba Ngubo said the municipality cannot blame the consumers for not settling their accounts because its staff made it difficult for them to pay.

"The level of service there is simply appalling."

He said customers had to repeatedly go to the municipal officers without getting assistance even for the simplest of things.

Ngubo said customers were forced to collect information, which the City should have access to on its own system, so they could have their bills corrected.

"Even when you come back with those documents it's a long argument before they are recognised and it's acknowledged that your account needs to be rectified," said Ngubo.

DA councillor Renesha Jugmohan and Mpac chair Mary Schalkwyk said the municipality's call centre was also dysfunctional and customer complaints were not attended to unless a

councillor contacted the general manager of the relevant business unit.

The ACDP's Rienus Niemand said Msunduzi was in the business of selling water and electricity but it had no systems in place to charge those who were stealing those services.

He made reference to *The Witness* report yesterday on the 242 Aloe Ridge flats where the MK war vets had made

illegal electricity connections.

Ndlovu-Gambu said the City was currently collecting R334 million monthly and that was only a fraction of what the municipality should be getting.

She said the new payment office at the Liberty Midlands Mall will be opened "very soon".

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