

# Cape Town's water plans go underground

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● This time last year, drought-stricken Cape Town was near rock bottom, the ground baked to a hard crust.

Now the ground is riddled with holes – more than 26,000 registered boreholes and wellpoints at the last count, up from just 1,500 in 2016, according to council figures.

Rather than wait for salvation from above, residents, businesses and government authorities are digging deep at an unprecedented rate to quench their thirst underground.

A year on from the Day Zero threat of water rationing, focus is shifting away from dams to relatively untapped aquifers, at a cost of between R10,000 for a wellpoint to more than R50,000 for a borehole.

The Western Cape public works department this week confirmed it has secured the water supply to 57 of its 90 key facilities – most of them in Cape Town – by sinking boreholes.

The city has earmarked groundwater extraction as a key component in its draft water strategy, which aims to find an additional 300-million litres a day in the next decade.

It wants to increase the contribution of groundwater extraction, desalination and treated wastewater to almost 25% of total supply. The strategy proposes recharging un-



**The number of boreholes in Cape Town grows by the day.** Picture: Esa Alexander

derground aquifers with treated wastewater.

Borehole water is also being used to rescue parched rural towns, including Beaufort West and most recently Oudtshoorn, where the government has budgeted R91m to stop taps running dry.

But the groundwater craze has unearthed concerns about the government's ability to monitor and protect a water resource that is still relatively unknown. There are also fears – so far largely unsubstantiated – that groundwater may start drying up if too much is extracted.

This week, key water stakeholders and scientists added their voices to those already sceptical about the government's capacity to ensure sustainable groundwater extraction.

Jasper Slingsby of the South African Envi-

ronmental Observation Network said Cape Town was drilling in environmentally sensitive areas without knowing the potential long-term impacts.

“The city is still declaring an official state of disaster due to the drought as this allows them ... to initiate any work they like with regard to water augmentation projects without doing an environmental impact assessment,” said Slingsby.

Gavin Kode, the Western Cape government's deputy director-general of public works, said: “Monitoring ... indicates that groundwater levels in the Cape Flats aquifer are at natural levels and have not been significantly impacted by the current drought, nor have groundwater levels deviated from the pattern observed during the past 18 years.”