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In conversation with the Mayor Hill-Lewis

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The ground-level boardroom at The Citadel in Claremont was packed with business types on Wednesday 15 February, all there to listen to and engage with Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis on the City of Cape Town's plan "to keep the lights on", literally and figuratively.

While the just-under-30-minute speech he gave on City projects focused on establishing and improving infrastructure resilience, energy resilience, personal security and public transport inspired hope, it was the subsequent Q&A session that held informative nuggets.

Here is what the Mayor had to say on homelessness, scrapyards, water stability and the Foreshore Freeway bridges, also known as Cape Town's Unfinished Bridges.

Homelessness is top-of-mind for many residents who have repeatedly asked why the City has not acted on people living on public open spaces.

Hill-Lewis said it was important to understand that, according to the law, no-one in South Africa can be removed from any structure, formal or informal without an order issued by the High Court.

"And even to apply for that order the court will not even consider the application until you can prove you can provide alternative accommodation at your own, in other words the public's, expense."

It goes further than that. Not only must the City provide alternative accommodation, but the accommodation must be in the vicinity of where the person currently stays.

"That phrase is not defined, but it certainly isn't 50 km away. It's probably at maximum 5 km away and, secondly, that alternative accommodation must meet some undefined level of dignified accommodation that the court has stipulated."

The City is currently appealing the first of those preconditions, "in the vicinity", in the Supreme Court.

He said over the past year the City had gone to speak to "every single one of the people living on the street" to assess their circumstances.

"Are they truly homeless while they're living on the streets? What is their mental condition? Do they have any addiction? They have been visited by social workers, sometimes two or three times.

"They have been referred to facilities. We've made job placements available for them on the EPWP (Expanded Public Works Programme). We have tried to help them get ID books just so that they can access the Sassa (South African Social Security Agency) grants."

He said this had been done with the understanding that if this suite of care interventions were consistently refused the City would have to go to court.

"And now we are at the point where that help has been persistently refused, and we are going to court. And I have no doubt it will be very controversial. But just know, on hearing



The unfinished bridges in the Foreshore.
PHOTO: SUPPLIED

that, what has come before."

Most residents may have missed this, but in December last year the government ratified a law that bans cash transactions in scrap trading and suspends certain metal scrap exports for six months "in a bid to stem the economy from haemorrhaging R47 billion annually".

Hill-Lewis said, in a bad week, the City can lose up to R1 million to cable theft. He was unsure whether the ban will help, but it may just raise the price of copper and make it even more attractive to steal.

"It isn't just an enforcement problem. Ultimately, it's an economic problem. These are valuable assets that have a valuable resale market and if people are unemployed and poor a certain proportion of them are going to break the law and copper is an easy target."

Hill-Lewis said scrapyards run a sophisticated operation.

"We have a specialised unit in the City that deals with metal thefts. They do an amazing job. I have been out with them late at night several times. They raid scrapyards all the time."

He says the scrapyards have become incredibly good at hiding illegal copper, adding it is rarely kept on site or is buried under tons of other metal.

"It's very hard to find. I did not know that it was possible to get something called a copper sniffing dog. I didn't know copper had a smell, but we in Cape Town have just got our very first copper dog. He is well-trained and apparently being very effective at finding wound-up cable under 2 tons of squashed cans."

Copper theft is also very difficult to prosecute. Hill-Lewis explained the copper is often melted down within minutes of it being stolen into huge copper ingots and then transported.

At this point it was difficult to identify the copper as stolen goods which, in turn, means a case cannot be opened at a police station.

"So what we are doing right now is piloting it as it is not yet in full production," says Hill-Lewis. "A chemical signature, that's the best way I can describe it, the chemical signature inside the copper itself, that even if you melt it you can use a little field test kit, something like a drug test kit."

"You put a tiny little chip of copper into that kit, break the chemicals and it shows you that

it's your copper. Then we can use that to identify our copper and lay charges where necessary.

With dam levels in the Cape again being scrutinised (Day Zero – we will never forget), Hill-Lewis said in 2018 the City put a plan into action to deliver 300 megalitres (30% of the city's water demand) from non-dam sources.

He said between 80 and 100 megalitres are already "online", thanks to two aquifer systems – the Cape Flats and the Table Mountain aquifer.

"The Atlantis aquifer is coming online in the next probably six months and that will add another 20 to 30 megalitres a day. So we'll be nearly halfway to our targets."

Referring to these as the smaller projects, he says construction on "the big one" will start early next year.

"A 150 megalitre water recycling plant in Cape Town. When it is completed, it will be the biggest water recycling plant currently in the world. And it will be a very new concept for Capetonians. So we have to think carefully about how we communicate about that."

He added the City had left the door open for desalination, but had not yet committed to any project.

"Because desalination is, firstly, extremely expensive, very power-intensive and extremely environmentally damaging.

"So of all the water options people usually ask, why are you not going to desalinate the water? We'll try a lot of other things before we commit to major desalination plants."

As for the unfinished bridges on the Foreshore, Hill-Lewis said they will be completed, but he couldn't say exactly when.

"I have this running joke in the City. I feel as if whenever I ask an engineer how much something is going to cost the go-to answer is always R2 billion.

"So when I asked them how much it is going to cost to finish those bridges they said R2 billion."

He said the way to fund the project will probably be through the sale of City-owned property located on the Foreshore.

"You will remember a few years ago the City tried to sell and develop that Foreshore property between the bridges.

"That tender process fell apart after it was challenged legally. We will start that process again, probably in the next year."