



The Ombudsman Saves Church a Shocking R3 Million in Electricity Bills

On 31 May 2023, *Rev. Emmanuel Hlatshwayo contacted our office seeking assistance to resolve discrepancies in the electricity billing on his account. He stated that the account, linked to his church in Halfway Gardens, Midrand, had been inaccurately billed based on estimated readings.



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The church's electricity billing issues date back to 2008 but only came to light in May 2017, when monthly charges, which had typically ranged from R314 to R6 500 between January and April 2017, suddenly skyrocketed to an alarming R938 823 13. This significant increase raised a serious concern and led the church to initiate discussions with the City of Johannesburg's (CoJ) Revenue Customer Services and City Power to resolve the matter.

"Despite numerous discussions with the department and entity, the electricity bill between June 2017 and December 2018 remained excessively high, soaring to between R60 000 and R83 000 per month."

Rev. Hlatshwayo explained that in June 2018, City Power technicians investigated the high electricity bills and found the external meter box empty - its meter had been destroyed in a 2005/07 car accident and removed by the utility without a replacement. It wasn't until after August 2018 that a new meter was installed yet, despite this, bills from August to November still ranged between R70 000 and R90 000 - way above the expected norm for a church that runs a 4-hour service on Sundays and an admin office that operates with only two laptops and a printer.

CoJ further cited two possible causes for the upsurge - *the church's zoning as a farming area and alleged supply to telecom towers* - but both were proved invalid, leaving the matter unresolved and the complainant increasingly frustrated.

In 2022, Rev. Hlatshwayo resumed his attempts to resolve this matter and was once again sent from pillar to post, until a year

* Not his real name

later when he sought relief from our office.

In accordance with Section 22 of the Ombudsman By-Law for the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, failure to comply with a lawful instruction from the Office of the Ombudsman constitutes an offence and may result in a fine, imprisonment of up to 12 months, or disciplinary action. Based on this provision, our office requested a comprehensive response to facilitate a swift resolution, which was received from both municipal parties.

The findings revealed multiple instances of maladministration, including misinformation from city officials who had advised the complainant to "just settle the bill" through the City's debt rehabilitation programme, the installation of a meter box without a meter and the allocation of an incorrect meter number not registered to the church. The matter was ultimately resolved last month, with the complainant's bill of R3.2 million - *accumulated over an eight-year dispute with the City of Johannesburg* - reduced to R130 000.

Oversight Visit to Eldorado Park Swimming Pool Reveals Multiple Irregularities and Structural Defects

The Department of Community Development (CommDev) is responsible for the upkeep and management of 57 public swimming pools across the City of Johannesburg, in addition to overseeing 113 recreation centres, 283 sports facilities, 87 libraries, and 11 museums. These swimming pools typically operate seasonally from September to March. However, in recent years, the department has encountered several challenges - *including maintenance backlogs, vandalism, and equipment failures* - that have resulted in some facilities remaining closed, leaving many communities without access to local swimming amenities.

In January 2024, our office conducted an own-initiative investigation into the condition of the local swimming pool in Eldorado Park Extension 9 and identified several concerns, including incorrectly installed tessellated tiles, damaged pool edges, and leaking pump seals. Moreover, troubling reports of unpaid maintenance contractors and the persistent issue of green, untreated pool water pointed to a more serious underlying issue of maladministration.



© City of Johannesburg





These findings prompted a recent oversight visit to the community by the Ombudsman, Advocate Siduduzo Gumede, who evaluated the continued delays in the facility's refurbishment - *delays that have left thousands of residents deeply frustrated*. While his visit sparked cautious optimism, it was quickly overshadowed by the community's deep-seated frustration with ongoing service delivery failures.

"Eldorado Park, a community frequently affected by such challenges, has seen its public pool deteriorate over the years and eventually becoming unserviceable."

The purpose of the visit was not only to update residents on the progress of the project but also to provide the respective department with an opportunity to engage directly with the community and offer reassurance that every concern was being carefully addressed in collaboration with our office and other key stakeholders.

Although the CommDev's project management team accompanying our office outlined several factors contributing to potential delays including - *poor inter-departmental coordination, the demands of managing multiple swimming pool projects across the region, and delayed payments to contractors* - the Ombudsman stressed that despite these challenges being beyond their direct control, they had a responsibility to actively listen to the community and address their concerns with compassion. He further emphasised that the swimming pool was not only a recreational space but served as a crucial social hub for the community, particularly its youth.



© Brixton Community Municipal Swimming Pool by Jozi Rediscovered

To foster social cohesion, create safe spaces for community interaction, and enhance the overall quality of life for all Johannesburg residents, CommDev. must cultivate a culture of accountability and reinforce oversight of its supply chain processes. These measures are crucial to fulfilling its promise of "equitable access, inclusive development, and excellence at all levels of participation" across all swimming pool facilities located in the seven regions of the city.

[Click here](#) to find out more about the public swimming pool services provided by the City of Johannesburg.

Pioneering Progress: Ombudsman's 4IR Vision

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) presents public institutions, including our office, with a great opportunity to improve service delivery, enhance operational efficiency, foster greater citizen engagement, and amplify impact.

In today's increasingly digital world, rising customer expectations demand that institutions adopt and integrate digital technologies more deliberately into their daily operations. As an office, we've already embraced automation through our Complaints Management System (CMS), which streamlines the intake, screening, and processing of new complaints. Additionally, once the CMS is fully integrated into our website, we will incorporate artificial intelligence to improve client interactions, gain deeper insights, and enhance user experiences in real time.

In October 2024, Ms. Tebello Maduna, one of our Joburg Ombudsman Ambassadors, took the initiative to enrol in a six-month "4IR Introduction to Digital Technologies" short course (which included topics such as artificial intelligence, big data, automation, data wrangling, and the Internet of Things (IoT), among others) at the University of Johannesburg.



Joburg Ombudsman Ambassador, Tebello Maduna



Our Communication and Media Unit is especially proud of Tebello's achievement and is eager to apply the knowledge and insights she has gained from the programme to help improve our clients' experiences.

"I am thankful for this opportunity, which will allow me to exemplify the value of embracing 4iR in the workspace and its potential to unlock limitless career opportunities for me."

Note: This programme is offered free of charge to anyone interested in exploring how digital transformation is reshaping industries and gaining the foundational knowledge needed to effectively integrate digital tools into their respective spaces.

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