

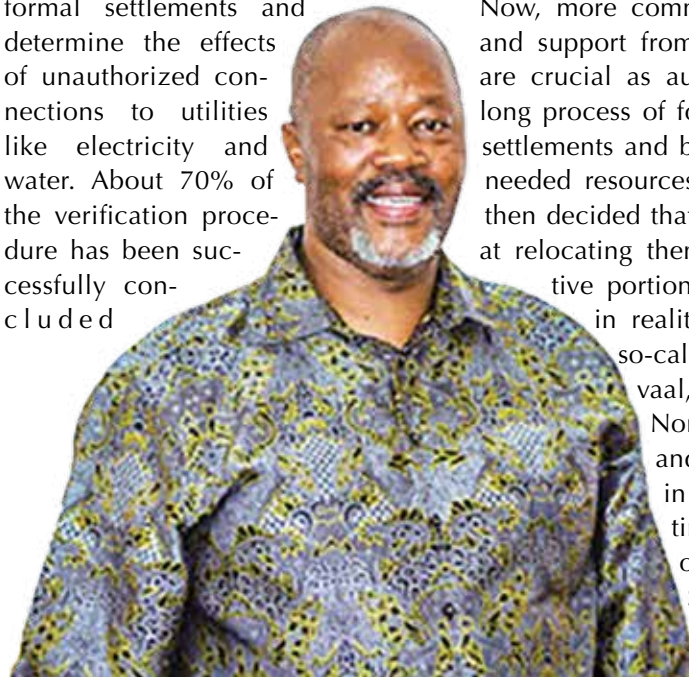
The JB Marks Local Municipality confronting the pressing crises of illegal land occupation and service connections



Speaking to our magazine, Cllr. Gaba Thithiba Ka Qhele, the Executive Mayor of the JB Marks Local Municipality, emphasized that by the time the new administration took office on 21 November 2021, the majority of open spaces had already been unlawfully occupied. Nearly eight court orders to evict illegal occupiers had been secured by that time, but only one of them had really been carried out, removing people from the land that was owned by Department of Agriculture. We moved them to the area near Dassierand. Restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic made the Municipality's proactive approach even more difficult to navigate.

Since 2022, the new administration has made multiple unsuccessful attempts to disconnect illegal connections, collaborating with the South African Police Services and the South

African National Defense Force as part of the Security Cluster. Subsequently, we initiated a comprehensive profile program to evaluate informal settlements and determine the effects of unauthorized connections to utilities like electricity and water. About 70% of the verification procedure has been successfully concluded



The Executive Mayor of JB Marks Local Municipality, Cllr Gaba Thithiba Ka Qhele

by the Municipality thus far, with a target of approximately 8,000 informal setups under its purview.

Now, more community engagement and support from local government are crucial as authorities begin the long process of formalizing informal settlements and bringing desperately needed resources to residents. "We then decided that we'll have to look at relocating them to other alternative portions of land because, in reality, the rest of your so-called Western Transvaal, this part of the North West Province, and part of Merafong in Gauteng, are sitting predominantly on dolomitic soils. So also here, that's one area that we are actually grappling with.

We don't have enough land available where we can actually relocate people. It's only few pockets of areas that we have," said the Executive Mayor.

"Since the Municipality lacks appropriate alternative land, Officials have sought inspiration from the neighbouring Gauteng's Governance Model, exploring strategies to formalize and connect informal settlements while curbing losses incurred due to illegal connections. We came to the conclusion that in the meantime, whilst looking at other best practices like in Gauteng where you find Government working with Eskom, we would embark on a program of connecting informal settlements with the view of curbing losses that we encounter as Municipalities with regards to electricity. However, the truth remains that we, the Municipality, are paying when people connect illegally, and if



we are not collecting revenue, we are losing money.

JB Marks Local Municipality grapples with the impact of the past two financial years' staggering electricity tariff hikes by Eskom through approval of Nersa, which imposed around 30% increases.

The Municipality cannot assume that consumers would be able to afford 30% electricity tariffs. We were left with no choice but to increase tariffs by 9% in 2023 and 12% in 2024 in order to lessen the potential impact on ratepayers, which remains a delicate balance between fiscal sustainability and community welfare.



JB Marks Local Municipality Officials geared up to initiate their first formalization project in Ward 17, Ext. 3 and 4 where assessment results suggested that nearly 900 informal structures could be given legal recognition. Building on this foundation, they planned to extend their efforts to other informal settlements, Hashtag in Ward 9 with close to 1600 informal structures and proceed to the next informal structures also known as Hashtag in Ward 26 which is just above 2000 informal structures getting close to 8000 that have been attended.

The aim is to alleviate socio-economic crises woven into the fabric of informal settlements. The administration has been crafting a set of innovative proposals to maintain effective service delivery while addressing those illegal activities. A Council endorsed on implementation of a R200 flat-rate service fee for households engaged in illegal water and electricity connections; funds raised through such initiative would be ring-fenced in securing formalized services moving forward.

The looming threat of resistance from illegal connection operators, who profit off the current disarray, presents itself as a formidable obstacle, and the Municipality is prepared to engage in disputes if necessary to restore order. The Municipality has on a parallel process, submitted an application for funding of over 16 informal settlements to the Integrated National Electrification Programme (INEP) and waiting for the outcome in January 2025.

As JB Marks Local Municipality embarks on its campaign against illegal land occupation and service connections, the local community remains on alert. Officials recognize the potential danger posed not only to the Municipality's revenue but also to residents' safety, with illegal connections resulting in catastrophic events that have even led to fatalities. The Administration has engaged all stakeholders with a firm commitment towards the solution to bringing accountability and stability in JB Marks Local Municipality.

According to Municipal reports, areas such as Ventersdorp have been hit

hard, experiencing power outages three to four times a week, despite recent months seeing a reduction in load shedding across the region due to cable theft between Coligny and Makokskraal.

The jurisdiction over electricity supply lies with Eskom, which is also grappling with challenges posed by cable theft, complicating repair efforts. Local farmers have even resorted to using drones and cameras in attempts to catch culprits, though catching thieves in these rural areas remains an uphill battle.

The repercussions are not only felt economically; they threaten the structure of the Municipality as well. Residents who consistently pay for their water and electricity services becomes increasingly frustrated.

"If this is allowed to continue, people will stop paying," the Executive Mayor warned, underlining the cyclical impact of rampant theft on services provided to the community. Residents, particularly those in informal



settlements, have been expressing their desire for a functional electricity grid, echoing the call for equitable access to utilities.

As JB Marks Local Municipality grapples with the dual crises of electricity theft and declining infrastructure, the road ahead is fraught with challenges. Nevertheless, community leaders remain determined to implement practical solutions and galvanize community support to restore dignity and functionality to these essential services. In response to these mounting issues, the Municipal Leadership is strategizing on new infrastructure development and service delivery expansions to ensure availability and fair distribution of electricity.

"We are committed to engaging communities and offering them an opportunity to be part of the solution. Our meetings with community leaders have shown that many residents are as fed up with illegal connections as we are," said the Executive Mayor. He emphasized that, many residents gen-

uinely wish to pay for services and therefore, expects the Municipality to enforce regulations against theft.

Alongside tackling electricity theft, the JB Marks Local Municipality authorities made strides towards addressing a longstanding water and sanitation challenges that plague underserved communities. The situation has been complicated by the age of existing

infrastructure, much of which dates back to the apartheid era and was not designed with the needs of expanded post-apartheid communities in mind.

Recent initiatives include constructing a new 25-Megalitre Reservoir in Ikageng, Extension 7 to address historical underfunding of Municipal Water Infrastructure and enhance service delivery during power outages.

