

Joburg's promises on fixing billing system



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Durban 22112011Journos protest at Right to Know Protest outside the Durban City hall.Picture:marilyn Bernard

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The City of Joburg will fix the billing problem in 19 months – or so it says.

Since 1999, The Star has reported on the city's chaotic billing system and promises to fix it. This is yet to happen.

And a look at the problems experienced by residents in 2002 are identical to those being experienced today.

In 2002, we reported: "Welcome to Blunderburg". Then we quoted residents' problems as: "No accounts or accounts being sent out late; No meter readings or inaccurate meter readings and data capture; unallocated payments, especially with electronic transfers; bad attitudes and unhelpful staff; long delays in sorting out disputes."

Yesterday, the member of the mayoral committee responsible for finance in the city, Geoffrey Makhubo, announced a new "roadmap" to resolve the crisis, saying it would be done in three phases – the first by the end of February, the second by June 30 and the final one by the end of 2012.



In the proposed plans, the council promises to provide customers with:

la reliable service and accurate bills.

lQuality meter readings.

lCustomer-friendly customer centres.

lQuick resolution of queries.

lThe upgrade of IT infrastructure. This is despite the city spending R900 million on a new computer system that went live two years ago.



Makhubo could not explain how all of the above would be done.

He did say, however, that no more money would be spent on IT systems.

And while the billing system has been an issue for the city for years, no one has been held accountable.

City manager Trevor Fowler said it was difficult to hold anyone to account because the revenue department involved “a series of processes in which many people are involved”.

The Star receives many complaints from frustrated residents, with numerous problems surrounding their billing.

“The issues of revenue and customer relations are among the top areas of concern raised by stakeholders during the recent Growth and Development Strategy 2040. This is also reflected in our daily interactions with the citizens of Joburg at grassroots level,” Makhubo said.



Durban 22112011Journos protest at Right to Know Protest outside the Durban City hall.Picture:marilyn Bernard

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Broadly speaking, he said, the two objectives of the roadmap are to improve the accuracy and integrity of the billing data and to improve the experience of customers when they interact with the city through the call centre, electronic communications and face-to-face contact with employees.

The latest set of promises are that by February 28:

!The accuracy of billing will be improved.

!Residents will experience a faster resolution of queries, including clearances and change of ownership queries.

!Customer relations will be improved and city officials held accountable.

The backlog in property valuations and customer queries will be cleared.



By June 30:

Customer data will be accurate.

The city's capacity to recover debt will be improved by improving credit management and being more responsive to customers.

Credit management to be more customer responsive, which will improve the city's capacity to recover debt.

By the end of 2013:

Key customers will be provided with correct bills (the plan does not identify who these key customers are).



Queries will be resolved and arrangements will be made for the settlement of outstanding debts.

New-generation meters and technology such as split pre-payment meters for low-usage customers will be installed.

Smart meters for higher-use consumers and remote metering systems will be installed throughout the city.

The City of Joburg's billing problems began in 1999 when the council decided to merge revenue data from the different, independent councils into one, centralised system.

In 1999, under Dan Painter, the Promis system was mooted to render billing Y2K-compliant. This was, however, soon cancelled because politicians decided that the company was a sanctions buster. Painter was fired when the system failed.

The decision was then taken to switch to the Venus IT system under Keith Sendwe in 2004. This cost the council R20 million.



Already billing problems started, with The Star reporting regularly on this. Sendwe's contract was not renewed after five years.

Operation Phakama, a SAPS system, which is currently being used, was started in late 2009 at a cost of between R800m and R900m. When it went live, problems began appearing, with residents complaining about inaccurate bills, double bills, no bills and service cut-offs.

Then the city got into a legal wrangle with the company that ran its billing system, Masana Technologies, forcing the company into liquidation.

More recently, IBM was appointed to take over Operation Phakama. Vicky Shuping was appointed in 2008, and was transferred to another department "for personal reasons" this year.

Gerald Dumas is currently in charge of revenue.