

Arrest, threats over Joburg arrears

Joburg property owners and managers are being arrested and threatened with arrest as well as taken into custody by the Joburg metro police department over apparent arrears and illegal connections.

Attorney Maïke Gohl said her firm alone was dealing with nine urgent applications for reconnections in recent weeks after her clients' water and electricity was cut off, despite having logged disputes with the municipality.

This was happening to property owners from Midrand to the Joburg CBD.

In one case, the building manager of business sectional title complex in Nancefield, Soweto was arrested for "illegally" connecting the electricity supply. He was released a few hours later. The complex had no water or electricity for three days, bringing businesses to a halt.

"The city had registered the incorrect meter numbers and we were already in dispute," she said, adding that numerous attorneys were always at the high court dealing with disconnections.

"In all of the instances that we are aware of, City Power has accused the clients, their building managers, or managing agents of bypassing or tampering with the meters, because either there were no meters, the meters were not functioning, or the meters at the property did not match the meters recorded on City Power's systems," she said.

Several clients had also been given "fines" for meter tampering and bypassing, although it is not yet clear whether these "fines" were criminal in nature, said Gohl.

City Power was invoking the provisions of electricity by-laws, which essentially provide that they can cut off supply and/or remove meters without prior notice, if there is an "illegal connection" or "bypass".

The problem, she added, was that once City Power regards account holders as having illegally connected themselves, it would ordinarily not allow a reconnection until a document, admitting guilt of an offence of the by-laws (which is prosecutable by a fine or imprisonment), and the client having paid a meter-tampering fee of about R18 000.

"Not many people can afford the 50% down-payment, especially if the account disputes run into hundreds of thousands of rand or even millions," she added.

If City Power was acting unreasonably or unlawfully, customers may need to bring an urgent application for a reconnection, but not everyone can afford this, she said.

The city last month launched Operation Buya Mthetho, a new multi-departmental operation aimed at enforcing by-laws.

City mayor Herman Mashaba said the auditor-general reported that, for the 2016/17 financial year, non-technical electricity losses amounted to more than R1 billion due to theft, bypass of meters, illegal decalibration of meters and damaged meters.

He said at least 2 000 businesses failed to pay for electricity, with some also illegally connected to services.

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