

**Johannesburg Water Festival 2006**  
**Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Mary Fitzgerald Square, Newtown**  
**21 April 2006**

Programme Director;  
Executive Mayor Amos Masondo;  
Members of the Mayoral Committee;  
Members of the Portfolio Committee;  
Managing Director;  
Members of the Board;  
Members of the Media;  
Honoured Guests.

I must start by congratulating the organisers for choosing Mary Fitzgerald Square, here in Newtown, as the main venue for Johannesburg Water Festival 2006. As one of the showcase developments in the city's urban renewal programme, the work that has been done here in Newtown is an inspiration to the rest of the country and makes a tangible statement about Johannesburg's commitment to being a world class African city.

Seeing a derelict and decaying part of Johannesburg transformed into a place of light and space is testimony to what can be achieved when dreams are matched with plans and commitment.

On a larger scale, South Africa, like Newtown, is moving into a new era of a vision made real. A bright new country is emerging out of the broken shell of the old. As our President stated in his opening address to Parliament this year, we are entering into our Age of Hope.

So much of the necessary groundwork for building a winning nation has been done. We have worked hard to lay a solid foundation and we are now starting to see the benefits.

All indicators point to a period of sustained economic growth and as I am sure you are aware, the theme for National Water Week, which has just passed, was *Water for Growth and Development*. This theme has particular resonance for Gauteng, and it is fitting that Johannesburg Water, the city's water and sanitation service provider, has gathered us here to launch this festival, dedicated to raising awareness of the essential role that water plays in the life of a city and its inhabitants.

As I stated to a gathering held to celebrate National Water Week in Vosloorus, in neighbouring Ekurhuleni, water is the most basic requirement for economic growth and indeed human survival. It is worth repeating here that economic growth cannot and must not take place at the expense of the integrity of our water resources.

Our situation, and indeed that of the whole world, has reached a critical stage in terms of water scarcity. We cannot afford to waste or pollute our water resources. Water is finite and it is vulnerable. This is particularly true for Gauteng, the economic engine that lies upstream of so much of the rest of our country.

As you well know, Gauteng is already importing huge volumes of water from Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal to satisfy the needs of its ever-growing population and economy. The need to conserve and efficiently manage the water we abstract, as well as the water we discharge as a city, has never been more important.

In this context I must commend the work that is being done by Johannesburg Water through its Operation Gcina'manzi. Johannesburg Water is working to ensure that potable water is not lost through leaking pipes and is used efficiently and responsibly by consumers, through metered consumption.

It is vital that water is seen to have value, not as a commodity through which to generate profit, but as something precious, to be guarded. Metering means that there is no incentive to waste. The incentive is to conserve.

As we enter into a phase of growth, we need to work more efficiently with what we have. It makes no sense to invest in new dams until we have maximised the potential of the water in the dams that we already have.

We, as the water sector, have made great progress in terms of developing policies and institutions that are capable of both conserving our water resources and as well as tackling backlogs in water services.

Since 2003, when municipalities assumed the role of Water Services Authorities, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has worked hand-in-hand with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the Gauteng Department of Local Government to tackle the challenges of delivering water and sanitation.

As I am sure you all know, the Executive Mayor, Mr Amos Maseko, is not only Mayor of Johannesburg, he is also the Chairperson of SALGA. I am delighted to see that he has been re-elected to these challenging offices and that we will continue to benefit from his leadership.

Building and strengthening the capacity of Water Services Authorities is vital work, as strong institutions at the local government level are the key to making better use of the resources we have available. Delivering water is not simply about the number of taps provided. Services must be sustainable, and strong institutions are needed to find the creative solutions needed to ensure that the taps keep running, that drinking water is safe and that manholes remain covered and not a danger to young children.

The importance of a platform like the Johannesburg Water Festival is not just to celebrate the fact that we have access to clean, safe drinking water. This is an opportunity to conscientise and educate one another about our responsibilities to ensure that our children continue to enjoy this same access to clean and safe water in years to come.

Education is key to sustainability and I am pleased to see that this festival has a strong focus on schools. Instilling caring and responsible attitudes to water conservation among children is all too important and teaching safe sanitation and hygiene will go a long way to creating a more healthy society.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry is committed to educating society about water and sanitation-related issues and through our Vision 2020, a school-based education programme, we are recognizing and rewarding the important role that young people play in education and awareness campaigns. We are collaborating with the Department of Education through this programme to ensure that water and sanitation are integrated into the national educational curriculum.

Last month we hosted the *Baswa Le Meetse* Awards, a national contest targeting grade six learners and aimed at conveying educational messages through the arts, to communities.

These awards formed part of South Africa's first ever Sanitation Week. Sadly sanitation has too often been relegated to the background, while water supply gets all the attention and resources. There are significant challenges that lie ahead if we are to meet the President's commitment that the bucket system will be completely eradicated in all formal communities by the end of 2007.

Sanitation Week is aimed at raising the profile of sanitation, health and hygiene and our theme for this year is "Washing of hands for a Healthy Life." I'm sure many of you have heard our successful radio campaign on this subject.

The importance of inculcating simple hygiene practices such as washing hands after using the toilet cannot be over-emphasized. Our work in providing safe sanitation must be accompanied by public health education to prevent the spread of disease.

I am pleased to learn that Johannesburg Water has implemented the roll out of Ventilated Improved Pit latrines (VIP) sanitation to informal settlements in the south of Johannesburg.

This multi-million rand project has provided safe sanitation to households that otherwise faced disease and deprivation. Although the recommended sanitation level for dense urban areas is waterborne sanitation, this is not possible in settlements that have not been formally constituted. The VIP latrine is, provided the geography of the area allows it, a cost effective and safe form of sanitation.

Aside from the obvious benefit of providing sanitation, what is commendable about these projects is the emphasis that is placed on creating economic opportunities for the beneficiary communities, who were contracted to provide both the building materials and labour for the roll-out. It is vital that our efforts to bring water and sanitation to marginalised communities bring direct economic benefits.

In closing then, I trust the Johannesburg Water Festival will grow in strength and assist in guiding South Africa's greatest city into a sustainable and prosperous future.

Water is, after all, life.

I thank you.