

COMMENT



CLEAR MESSAGE TO RENEWED WATER BOARDS

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ONE of the critical and necessary traits for any leader, whether it's in the political arena or in the market place, is an inquisitive mind. This is no more important than for ministers, whose decisions are consequential for millions of people. Information becomes the very life of those decisions.

A minister of water and sanitation may visit a Beyers Naude Local Municipality or any of the seven municipalities under the Sarah Baartman District Municipality, and enquire how many litres each of the municipalities uses per day, do the dams that feed the municipalities have enough water and for how long, what is the percentage of households with tap water access, and what are the current projects under way to meet water demands?

These are basic but critical questions and when you are told that some of these municipalities' dams are 0%, as a minister you are prone to react with frustration and anger. How does an entire municipality sit back and watch its water reserves deplete?

The best way for a minister of water and sanitation to support municipalities is through water boards, which are responsible for managing dams, building bulk water infrastructure and providing assistance to municipalities. They generate revenue, have their own independent boards of directors and provide a critical service at a cost to municipalities across the country.

It is through water boards that a minister can assist and intervene in municipalities like Beyers Naude and it is critical that the boards must be managed in the best possible way.

The past 12 months have been a great test for Minister of Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu's effective hiring and people skills.

Ministers come and go, and many administrators have learnt to survive, continue to pillage a department and hope for the next minister to quickly come along.

Unfortunately, Sisulu would not have any of it, change had to finally come in this critical department.

When you arrive at a department like water and sanitation, whose presence stretches the country wall to wall, from the central Karoo in the south, to Namaqualand in the north, from Mokopane in the east, to Delmas in the west, dwindling towns and faded villages all jostling and humping for water security, your task as a minister becomes insurmountable.

The first entity that urgently needed intervention was the Sedibeng water board in Gauteng. The minister made changes in Magalies water board, Amatola in the Eastern Cape, Lepelle Northern Water in Limpopo, and Umgeni in KwaZulu-Natal.

Almost all these boards took the minister to court to argue for the continuation of their entrenched interests, and the judges struck all their court challenges out with costs.

After resistance and court challenges, the minister has now established sound boards of directors in many water boards. The minister's demands are simple: transparency, integrity and accountability, and value for money in all bulk water projects. Sisulu finally met the renewed boards of these entities and her message was clear: Universal access to clean water is the ultimate goal and, therefore no wastage, corruption, and abuse of state resources shall be tolerated.

It's time to get to work.

Diko is the spokesperson for the Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu.