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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE MAYOR, THE MUNICIPAL MANAGER AND THE MAKANA MUNICIPALITY COUNCILLORS

14 August 2013

Rhodes University views itself as an integral part of the Makana region and the Eastern Cape. We are willing to shoulder responsibility in the search for collective solutions to problems that confront our community.

It is with great dismay that we are compelled to write this open letter, and draw attention to the utter failure of our municipality to deal effectively and efficiently with the crisis in water provision at our university and parts of town.

Since 6 August 2013 and for the past nine days, parts of Rhodes University, including 11 residences that house over 1000 students and wardens, have been without water. As this Open Letter was being written yesterday afternoon, 35 additional residences and various other parts of the university were also without water.

This is not the first time this year that we, the Rhodes University community, have been without water. Earlier this year, in March, we were without water for an extended period. Indeed, we came close to shutting down the university for health and safety reasons.

Now, once again, we are faced with the crisis of hundreds of our students and staff without drinking water, which the university has to supply. There is no water for personal ablutions, for cleansing, for flushing toilets. Conditions in the residence toilets are dire, with growing health concerns.

We are again on the brink of having to close the University. Despite the valiant efforts of our staff and the great fortitude of our students we cannot cope any longer. Can you at all imagine the chaos that will occur if the university has to close its doors? Or the economic impact that this will have on the town, which is highly reliant for its economic well-being on the university operating?

Section 27 of our Constitution states that ***Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water.*** Our constitutional right to sufficient water has been and is being violated. It is thus necessary for us to act as concerned citizens in defence of our right to sufficient water.

We are compelled to peacefully mobilise ourselves as a university and community because we are angry, very angry: at the indignity that we must suffer being without water; at the seeming lack of care of the Municipality; and at the lack of communication from the Municipality.

We are aware that we are not the only people who are angry – other residents in Makana who face water outages and suffer the same indignity are also angry. Many of them have not had water for many months!

We feel we are being treated like second-class citizens, which is not acceptable in our hard fought for and won democracy. So we are now mobilising in defence of our constitutional rights as citizens.

We, the residents, households and institutions of Makana, have a right to water. We dutifully pay municipal rates in the expectation that all citizens shall have access to safe and clean water. Rhodes itself pays over R2.5 million a month in rates and service charges. We expect the Municipality and its elected councillors to honour this right as servants of the community.

We can no longer remain silent in the face of these violations of our rights, to stand mute any longer as the crisis deepens, nine days into the water outage and with new parts of Rhodes now without water.

We must now act. In marching today to your offices, we seek to indicate that we have borne the numerous water supply outages and problems with great patience and resolve. We also wish to make visible our frustration and anger.

Above all, we wish to submit our demand for a responsive Municipality that takes seriously the provision of basic services to all residents. We demand that the Municipality give us a clear plan and a timetable for resolving the crisis of water provision.

As is well known to you, Rhodes University has many years sought to work with the Municipality. Indeed, we are in regular contact. We have constantly pledged our knowledge, expertise and skills so as to safeguard basic services and promote local economic and social development.

We, as a university, again pledge any support that may be required by the Municipality and that the university can reasonably offer with the express aim of resolving the crisis. This is our social responsibility, as a knowledge institution and the largest institution and employer in the town.

But, like today, when necessary we will also not hesitate to march, to demonstrate, to demand answers, demand better performance, and demand that you be responsive and accountable to residents. This is in defence of the rights enshrined in our Constitution to which we are all bound as a nation.

It is time for you, our municipal leaders, to demonstrate leadership and accountability to us, your constituents, and to give your full attention to the problems of basic services that are crippling our town and compromising the promise of a better life for all.

Rhodes University also calls for intervention at the highest level of government. We request an urgent investigation at the provincial and national government levels into water supply and water quality in Makana. We call upon the ministers of Higher Education and Training, Public Works, Water Affairs and Provincial and Local Government and the Eastern Cape MEC for Local Government to ensure that water security in Makana is secured for current and future generations.

Copied to:

The Minister of Higher Education & Training

The Director General of the Department of Higher Education & Training