

LETTER: Change water billing

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BY LARRY SYMINGTON
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IN THE first 20 years of democracy, the government did well in keeping to its promise of providing water on tap to all.

However, this came at a cost, causing undue stress in particular to the poor, by failing to keep pace and adequately address billing issues.

The first credit account most South Africans were ever exposed to was forced on them by the government for water. The "user pays" policy of "billed for past consumption" used

by the then apartheid government was adopted. The billing problems started early as the majority had no postal service, and few had title deeds.

The culture of "water on account" was never fully promoted, together with the belief that water is a basic right and protected under the constitution.

The free basic water policy (the first 6,000l a month) introduced in 2000 to poor households complicated the matter. The billing system did not separate the free or payable amounts and offered no account protection. Consumers knew about their debt only when they were already in debt, which is too late for the poor.

Many municipalities provide inaccurate information, and are often slow to respond to debt management. Unpaid utilities can affect people's credit status. It's time for a new approach: "pay as it flows" or "pay if it flows". Consumers should be empowered; water should be considered a measured tax, and not a tradable commodity, with the rate based on income and social standing, similar to e-tax, where all the checks and balances are already in place.

Consumer participation, transparency, speed of access to information and creditworthiness are the key to good governance, economic growth and water security for South Africans in the future.

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