

Fed-up residents start withholding rates on KwaZulu-Natal South Coast

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Fed-up Umdoni residents, on the KZN South Coast, have started a campaign to withhold rates in retaliation against poor service delivery.

They said they are tired of being taken for granted by the municipality.

The Rates Withholding Movement, which was started by Geoff Smailes in May 2020, now has attracted more than 100 supporters.

Smailes said the movement was started after seven years of begging and pleading with Umdoni's leadership and management to give residents services that they were paying for, but not receiving from the municipality.

"We got sick and tired of the excuses and the promises, that is why we have refrained from paying rates," said Smailes. He added that in the last three years they saw how not paying rates would be justifiable."

"We have legal reasons for not paying rates. What we have also noted is that the money we pay is used in areas that don't pay rates, and that's not okay. If I am paying for roads to be fixed in my area, that money should not be used to fix roads anywhere else," Smailes said.

He said the number of people who joined the movement went down because some had to move away from Umdoni and died. "I am hoping more than 1 000 people in Umdoni join the movement. Hopefully people from other municipalities will also be inspired by this movement and create their own," he said.

Smailes said they are also working closely with the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (Outa) to ensure that their movement has an impact.

DA caucus leader in Umdoni, Edwin Baptie said the Rates Withholding Movement is having the desired effect by bringing the municipality's leadership to its senses.

The municipality's rates collection fell from previous levels of 95% to 72% at the end of December 2020, he said. "It was never the intention of the movement to refuse payment ... Given the long-established practice of ignoring ratepayers' concerns and rejecting every form of constructive engagement from representatives, there was little else that ratepayers could do to drive home their demands," said Baptie.

He added that the neglect of infrastructure in the economic engine house of rate-paying areas is destructive and irresponsible.

The argument that all rural residents cannot afford rates is patently dishonest, he said.

Baptie said those residents who are genuinely indigent will benefit from the indigent policy and provisions in the rates policy by-law.

As public representatives they cannot participate in the Rates Withholding Movement, but they have for many years warned the municipality of its inevitability, he said.

Umdoni Municipality had not responded to *The Witness*' query at the time of publication.