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# FIXING A HOT MESS METRO

There's nothing like an election, and a G20 summit, to focus a city's minds — at least, that's what Joburg's long-suffering residents hope

Natasha Marrian

**C**onditions in Joburg are dire. Residents were hit again this week by lengthy water outages. But with thoughts turning to the local elections due in 2026, there seems to be hope of turning around the situation.

At last there seems to be unity of approach. Organisations that have a direct interest in fixing the problems are now part of the presidential working group, which has been divided into eight work streams to tackle the most serious problems.

One of them is the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO). Its executive director, Rashid Seedat, has a strong grasp of what has gone wrong in the city over the years and is "cautiously optimistic". He says: "For the first time, parties beyond the local government sphere and concerned about what's happening have been afforded direct involvement in the process. So this is an intergovernmental process, but it also includes external stakeholders."

These include ratepayers' associations, nonprofit organisations and business chambers as well as the various tiers of government. About 200 representatives from these organisations came together three weeks ago.

"We broke up into each of the work streams and thrashed out short-, medium- and long-term goals ... Short term is the next two or three months. Medium term is the length of the intervention, 18 to 24 months. The long term is 2027 and beyond."

A key initiative this year is preparing the city for hosting the G20 summit in November — President Cyril Ramaphosa personally demanded action after a visit to the inner city in March.

Seedat is no stranger to the lay of the land in the city. Apart from his

work with the GCRO, he was a political activist during apartheid. In the early days of democratic local government, he worked in then mayor Amos Masondo's office, heading its central strategy unit. Back then, there was a structural crisis, as the city had to amalgamate the former race-based authorities as well as what used to be separate municipalities, for example Roodepoort, into a single system.

"For somebody like me, it is also a kind of a personal mission. This is a city that I was born in and worked for. I have a commitment to making sure that it gets onto the right track."

Jozi My Jozi is a nonprofit started by Anglo American three years ago, after its exit from the inner city. The organisation is part of the presidential working group but has been working independently over the past three years to help revive the inner city, partnering with big business, professionals and the government.

It undertakes a variety of campaigns, with tangible results for the inhabitants of the inner city, says head of communications Innocent Mabusela.

"It's not about us doing it because we want to get accolades as an organisation. It's a constitutional obligation and we are doing it for the benefit of the city and its people."

"Right now, we've got 120 partners and some of the big corporations are part of our steering committee," he says. These include Anglo American, MTN, Absa, Standard Bank, Nedbank, BlueQ and state-owned entities Transnet and the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa.

Transnet is moving 600 of its head office staff from Parktown back to its Rissik Street buildings this month. Some staff have already returned to the Carlton Centre and others were based temporarily in Eloff Street, until the



Rissik Street offices were redeveloped. The logistics giant has a large property portfolio, substantially in the CBD.

The redevelopment of its old buildings near Park Station was part of Transnet's strategy to reduce costs, by using its own properties rather than leasing office space. "Refurbishment of the historic building into a modern

state-of-the-art working space, while still retaining its heritage image in certain respects, is a demonstration of this capability," Transnet tells the FM.

Significant improvements will accompany Transnet's staff moving back to the CBD. These include CCTV cameras, complemented by security personnel patrolling the area. A new parkade is being constructed.

**But it will** take more than the efforts of the presidential working group to rebuild the city.

One reason for the collapse is the hung councils that have been a feature since 2016. The city has had 11 mayors in the past nine years and is plagued by political instability.

This requires intervention by the national government, the GCRO found in a study done this year. "[There is] evidence of political instability imposed by coalition arrangements in a country that still has not promulgated laws for governing them ... The dearth of laws governing coalition arrangements in Joburg and several metropolitan municipalities has made room for political opportunism, retarding decision-making on important operational and strategic issues like integrated development planning, service delivery, and reparation of damaged infrastructure."

The trouble is that legislation meant to stabilise coalitions in local government is proceeding way too slowly through parliamentary processes. The department of co-operative governance & traditional affairs says it wants to ensure the legislation is finalised before the local government elections. It will make provision for binding coalition agreements, vote thresholds and mayoral rules.

In the absence of the legislation, any hope of stability after the 2026 elections will be dashed. **x**