

AGEING INFRASTRUCTURE

Put this in your PIPE and smoke it

The new South Africa is alive with possibility and change. And so it should be. This metaphor should also be transcribed to other aspects of the 'engine room' of our economy, namely our infrastructure.

Since the onset of our democracy, many politicians and decision makers have won the hearts of many voters by fast-tracking urban renewal projects and upgrading parts of our road infrastructure. This is especially true in township and rural areas. A sector that needed much intervention. There is, however, a greater and more significant entity that, for too long, has gone unnoticed – our underground infrastructure: a network of sewerage, storm-water and water pipelines, which constitute the 'moving parts' of our economy.

Should these ageing networks grind to a halt as a result of large-scale failure, we would instantly be catapulted into chaos and ultimately be relegated to a third world country status.

Rapidly deteriorating pipelines, coupled with a steady population growth, as well as constant uploading of new communities and areas to these sewerage and water networks,

further add pressure to our fragile system.

The result, a continuous failure of these systems propagated by water main bursts, sewerage manholes surcharging, and collapsed sections of road due to underground pipeline failure – and this with 2010 on the horizon.

Much like global warming, we are at the forefront of an impending crisis – unless drastic

“we are at the forefront of an impending crisis – unless drastic and urgent measures are taken”

measures are taken. Recent flooding in the Western Cape further highlighted the potential crisis that exists when a temporary failure of the stormwater network occurs.

There is an urgent need to upgrade, replace and rehabilitate these ageing underground networks. Conventional methods of construction would include digging up the old pipes and installing new ones. This task is further

complicated when considering that most of the upgrading needs to take place in densely populated metropolitan areas where peak hour traffic congestion is the order of the day.

The battle is, however, far from lost. For years, the international community has benefited from innovative ways of replacing, upgrading and rehabilitating their underground infrastructure. The buzz phrase is – trenchless technology.

Upgrading, replacing, rehabilitating and installing new pipelines without digging long trenches and, in some instances, with no excavation at all is possible when implementing aspects of this technology.

Trenchless technology has made its way into the South African market, but is stifled by a lack of action and urgency to upgrade our underground infrastructure.

With service delivery – especially water and sanitation – becoming a contentious issue, an opportunity exists for politicians and decision makers with insight to champion such initiatives and, once again, to win the hearts of many and save the day.



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