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Xolile George - a distracted voice of organised local government?

It has emerged that the CEO of the South African Local Government Association (Salga), Xolile George, has been reappointed to the interim board of the embattled state agency, the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, Prasa (www.enca.com). While the Minister of Transport, Dipuo Peters, has defended the appointees' expertise, it is not clear why George should be the Salga nominee for such a demanding position in a deeply troubled organisation not directly related to local government. The unfolding drama at Prasa, not to mention the considerable challenges faced by local government, raise questions as to whether the CEO of Salga should not be exclusively devoting his energies to the task at hand, i.e. local government, as well his organisation (Salga), not least given his multi-million rand salary.

Where should Salga's CEO's energy go?

Xolile George was in the spotlight two years ago when it emerged that he earned more than anyone else in local government, either at an executive or political level (www.politicsweb.co.za). At the time, Municipal IQ questioned the CEO's multi-million rand package, which had increased in excess of inflation, especially in the context of Salga's pleas for wage restraint from union members and the emerging social crisis of wage inequality (municipaliq.co.za).

With the entrance of several new DA-led metros onto the political landscape last year, George faced another challenge - when the value of Salga membership was questioned by new coalition members (municipaliq.co.za). Subsequent to this, Salga has weighed in on the emerging Eskom debt crisis (municipaliq.co.za). In addition, the organisation has commented on the demands being placed on local government's financial reporting (municipaliq.co.za). But with all of this at stake, along with the induction of thousands of new councillors across the country, at last year's Salga's conference delegates complained that the first day was spent in its entirety dealing with registration (citizen.co.za).

So where should George's energies lie? There is little doubt that as the voice of organised local government, there is a lot to be done, not least in collecting membership fees from financially strained municipalities. George has been credited with improving collection rates during his tenure as CEO, as well improving Salga's audit outcomes (www.news24.com, salga.org.za). The South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) however has been less enthusiastic about George, most pointedly in regard to his questionable salary package (www.samwu.org.za).

Along with Prasa, George sits on the more complementary boards of the SA Cities Network and (somewhat linked) Eastern Cape Rural Development Agency (a province in which George has initiated a number of social investments salga.org.za). These roles also make sense in light of his training as an economist (with a Bachelors degree in Economics from the University of Fort Hare and Honours and Masters degrees in Economics from the University of Pretoria). George also has an Executive MBA from the Postgraduate School of Business in the Netherlands, a Postgraduate Diploma in Company Direction from the Institute of Directors (IOD), and a Management and Leadership course from the Wits School of Management and Leadership (www.zoominfo.com). Before taking over the reigns at Salga 7 years ago, George was a director of economic development in Johannesburg, as well as a regional director at the City (www.news24.com).

It remains unclear, with all that local government needs to tackle in the current political and economic context and with challenges facing Salga, why George should be devoting any of his (very well remunerated) time to the Prasa board, the governance of which has assumed soap opera proportions. It will be interesting to see whether members will question his name being in the headlines for rail transport rather than for direct local government advocacy.

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