

'A slap in the face' by govt

Dept to splurge R32 mln on premier's residence facelift

CLIVE NDOU

TAXPAYERS should brace themselves for another overspending scandal following revelations that the KZN government is planning to splurge a whopping R32 million on upgrades to the premier's official Parkside residence in Pietermaritzburg.

KwaZulu-Natal Premier Willie Mchunu confirmed in replies to the Democratic Alliance's parliamentary questions that the Public Works Department had been carrying out renovations at his Parkside official residence.

"The total cost of all the required renovations to the Parkside residence is estimated by Public Works to be R32 650 336, including professional fees," he said in response to a written question by DA provincial Public Works spokesperson Sizwe Mchunu.

Mchunu also revealed that the department had already spent R1,7 million on upgrades at the residence, with R540 000 spent on upgrading a single bathroom, R1 million on swimming

pool surrounds and R180 000 on repairs to electrical light fittings.

In addition to the R32 million, which would be spent over the next six years, Mchunu also revealed that the provincial government was forking out close to R30 000 a month for the maintenance of the residence, with gardening services alone costing R15 960 a month.

Sizwe Mchunu, who said he had decided to seek answers directly from the premier after no one in government could provide a "precise" record of the cost of the upgrades, compared the project at the residence to the controversial Nkandla security upgrades.

The Nkandla security upgrades project was initially priced at R27 million but ended up costing the taxpayer R240 million.

"It looks like we are going in that direction. The renovations started as a small thing but costs now keep on escalating."

"There is no guarantee that the final bill would be R32 million as things such as inflation have to be factored in —

it could easily balloon to hundreds of millions," he said. Spending at the premier's residence

takes place on the back of the province's punishing austerity measures that saw government scale down on spending on a number of programmes, including job creation.

"What is happening at that residence makes one wonder whether the government's priority is on serving the lavish lifestyle of our premier at the expense of our people."

"While the Premier's Office has confirmed that the expenditure has been budgeted for under Vote 1, the fact remains that such runaway expenditure is a slap in the face of every person in our province struggling to make ends meet."

"In particular it is a blow for those who are currently homeless or who have been living in transit camps for years as they wait for low-cost government housing," he said.

A Pietermaritzburg building contractor registered with the KwaZulu-Natal Master Builders Association described some of the upgrade costs as "ridiculous".

"I do not understand how upgrading

a single bathroom could cost R540 000. It appears to me as if someone has massively inflated prices there," he said.

Approached for comment, the Premier's Office said renovations at the residence were the responsibility of Public Works.

"The Public Works Department is the landlord and we are only a tenant. Public Works would be able to provide a better response when it comes to those kinds of matters," the premier's spokesperson, Ndabezinhle Sibiba, said.

However, the provincial Public Works Department said departments, including the premier, were responsible for upgrades or renovations at the buildings they occupied.

"It is the departments that pay for those kinds of projects — all we do is to arrange for a service provider once the department that wants to do renovations has put together a budget," said the department's spokesperson, Mbulelo Baloyi.

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Premier's Parkside official residence in Pietermaritzburg, which is being renovated to the tune of R32 million. PHOTO: FILE/GOOGLE



RENOVATION COSTS
Bathroom:
R540 000
Electrical light fittings repair:
R180 000
Swimming pool:
R1 010 000
Total renovation costs:
R32 million

MAINTENANCE COSTS
Water and electricity:
R10 000 per month
Garden services:
R15 960 per month
DSTV: R1 755 per month
Household cleaning and other:
R5 000 every four months

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