

City's urgent need for RDP houses and backlog clearance

With rapid urbanisation and a growing population, cities like eThekweni are under tremendous pressure to find ways of providing housing for the poor, writes **Bheki Mbanjwa**.



The Cornubia housing scheme north of Durban.

PICTURE: SIYANDA MAYEZA

THE urgency of the situation is not lost on Human Settlements MEC Ravi Pillay, whose offices are in Mayville, home to one of the largest informal settlements in the city.

Just a peep through the window and one is transported to the Cato Crest informal settlement nearby, which perhaps best sums up the story of housing delivery in eThekweni.

Here newly built RDP houses exist side by side with corrugated shacks ready to crumble and give away at the slightest provocation by the forces of nature.

Pillay is the first to admit that the government simply cannot reach all it wants to reach at the desired pace. Rapid urbanisation, while not peculiar to eThekweni, is

forcing the government to rethink its strategies. Delivering his budget speech last month, Pillay told members of the KZN legislature that urbanisation could not be wished away, it had to be managed.

"The apartheid cities were planned for an apartheid lifestyle. The truth is that the city was planned for 20% of the people. With the fall of apartheid, the floodgates were opened for people to rightfully claim their space in urban areas".

This is why the housing challenge is most acute in eThekweni, he says adding that in every other town within the province, the end is within the horizon.

"The second biggest city is Msunduzi (Pietermaritzburg), and we have major programmes there which are starting to take shape. We have Vulindlela, which is across nine wards. We have just launched the biggest social housing project there". It is difficult to give an exact figure of the backlog of housing provision in the province as this is said to be rising despite the thousands of houses built each year. "It is a moving target," Pillay explains.

In 2011, the Census figures put the housing backlog for KZN at 640 000 houses. This included people living in informal settlements, those living in backyard shacks, those

living in outbuildings and paying rent and those living in traditional houses or huts in rural areas.

With about 130 000 houses having been built since then, that figure should be lower, but Pillay believes it has likely increased, all thanks to rapid urbanisation.

According to research from the National Planning Commission, a further 7 to 8 million people will be living in South African cities by 2050. A million of these will be in eThekweni, it is estimated.

That is why a sharper focus needs to be on eThekweni, Pillay believes. Currently about one third of the budget goes to eThekweni. But the MEC says the issue is so pressing here that he would like to increase this to between 35 and 40%, but cautions that he cannot allocate money that will not be spent.

"Planning and implementation at this scale in a city the size of eThekweni requires very sophisticated and energetic but most importantly stable administrative force."

The critical post of the deputy city manager responsible for Infrastructure had been vacant for a very long time and this is said to have contributed to the slowing down in the pace of delivery. Pillay says, however, that there have been some good signs since the new political administration took office.

"I have had several meetings

with the mayor and I think she understands that. I am allowing them the space to fill that vacancy to pull those things together." The provision of houses in rural areas has been a "phenomenal success", claims Pillay. However, there are fewer challenges in rural areas than there are in cities like eThekweni.

"In urban areas you get densification challenges and land challenges," he says.

Pillay says the government needs to be more aggressive without being "reckless or adventurous" in terms of land. Some of the developments are delayed due to very high prices being demanded by owners of large tracts of land.

Camps

This way the private landowners could dictate the pace of housing developments. "We have been delayed and in some cases ripped off in terms of the prices we need to pay." He believes the Appropriation Act may be the answer, as it will split the expropriation and compensation processes. This means that the process of compensation can be dealt with later, after the land is expropriated for use in the public interest.

"Currently, even if a person who owns land knows that he or she does not have a case in terms of expropriation, they delay it on the

basis of lack of agreement on the price and that can drag it out for years," he said. Some landowners were asking for exorbitant prices despite their own history of the acquisition of that land.

"We need to be firm and we cannot have a dilly-dallying approach," Pillay says, adding that he hopes the policy conference of the ANC will have a sharper articulation on this issue. On dealing with densification challenges, Pillay says one of the considerations will be the high rise buildings. While these have worked with social housing projects where people pay rent, they can be problematic when it comes to the very poor.

The maintenance of high rise buildings can be costly given the amenities like lifts that are needed. Also to be considered is the management model like the body corporate model.

Currently, the province is building about 25 000 houses a year, meaning it will take about 20 years to build 500 000 houses, way fewer than what the backlog was estimated to be back in 2011.

This, Pillay says, is a clear indication that there needs to be a change in strategy. Hence the government has started looking at other interventions, which include the intensification of the informal settlements upgrade programme.

"Those upgrades include secur-

ity of tenure and if there is a piece of land that dweller can call his, then they can plan for the development using their own resources, but such will need social facilitation," he said. Another issue that needs social engagement is land invasions. He said some of the "shack lords" were using the situation to their advantage.

"Once you start talking you are more likely to find a solution and expose any exploitation of the situation," Pillay says.

Another problem with the land invasions is that some communities want to occupy land not suitable for occupation. In some informal settlements the department has had to spend millions of rand building retaining walls to mitigate the dangers.

Pillay also admits that it will take a long time to eradicate transit camps. He says if the government were to prioritise building houses for people in transit camps, that would mean every house built within the next two years would have to be allocated to people in the transit camps.

However, this was not sustainable as the department had to also consider those living in informal settlements. He says his department is working hard to respond to the challenges.

"If eThekweni can get it right, that would be half the battle won."