

■ IN ARREARS

Municipalities in KZN owed R63 million

Public Works in debt to 30 councils

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THE KwaZulu-Natal Department of Public Works owes more than R63 million in property rates to about 30 municipalities in the province.

This emerged from questions asked in the provincial legislature by the DA. Those owed money include eThekweni, Msunduzi, Mooi Mpfana (Mooi River) and Inkosi Langalibalele (Estcourt) municipalities.

A breakdown of the amounts owed shows that about R46m is more than 150 days in arrears, R13.9m is between 120 and 150 days old, and R2.9m has been owed for between 90 and 120 days old.

The department said it normally paid its accounts within 30 days.

Public Works spokesperson Mbulelo Balozi said there were ongoing discussions with the municipalities to address the issue. Part of the problem was that municipalities' rates increases had been higher than the department had budgeted for, he said.

"That causes a shortfall. We would like to get real-time projections of rates increases from municipalities."

He said some of the rates bills had not been paid because they were being disputed.

Public Works also said in its response that, at times, the municipalities did not timeously bill them for rates due to their (municipality) internal resource challenges, which then caused payment delays.

DA MPL and spokesperson on Public Works, Martin Meyer, said the party regarded it as inconceivable that

while so many of KZN's municipalities were struggling to keep the lights on, the biggest culprit when it came to paying bills on time was a provincial department.

"The situation in many of our municipalities is so dire that every rand of outstanding debt could be the difference between providing services or not, and even paying salaries or not," said Meyer.

He said they expected Public Works MEC, Peggy Nkonyeni, and her department to take immediate steps to address this. The provincial government could not be one of the main contributors to municipalities' woes, Meyer said.

"It is also unacceptable that while residents and businesses are expected to always pay their utilities and rates on time – or face having their services cut – that KZN's ANC-led government is allowed to have its debt spiral out of control without any action being taken.

"This is a slap in the face to every law-abiding citizen in our province," he said.

In Parliament yesterday, it was disclosed that the government owed service providers nationally about R7.1 billion. Provincial authorities failed to pay R6.5bn within the required 30 days in 2018/19, and national departments failed to make payments totalling R634m.

"The DA reiterates our call for a comprehensive public spending review," said Dr Leon Schreiber MP, who elaborated on the damage that late state payments were inflicting on the country.