

Gauteng wants to finally evict freeloaders

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New head of infrastructure says situation is untenable as taxpayers cough up

TWO YEARS ago, the Gauteng provincial government said it would act against public servants and their friends who were living in state houses for free.

The freeloaders are still not paying rent, and Gauteng's newly appointed head of infrastructure, Bethuel Netshiswinzhe, yesterday revealed plans to evict them.

He was appointed to the position in February.

The head of department also revealed that a number of commercial properties owned by the government, such as public hospitals, were also illegally occupied.

He said some of these illegal occupants were even operating

hair salons in state hospitals. Detailing just how serious these illegal occupations are, Netshiswinzhe said their records indicated that at least 50 senior officials in his department and hundreds more in the Gauteng provincial government were "freeloading off the Gauteng taxpayer".

"In fact, approximately 60 percent of occupants of state residential properties are government officials," Netshiswinzhe said.

He said these officials included some senior government officials, some at deputy director level, who could afford to pay

but chose not to.

All these officials receive housing allowances. A chief director, according to a document seen by The Star, earns a total package of R780 000, which includes a salary, and a housing and car allowance.

"While these occupants continue to live rent-free in government properties, the state is compelled to pay municipal rates and taxes in respect of these properties, an expense that the taxpayer must carry.

"Furthermore, these illegal occupants expect the government to not only pay for rates and taxes, but also to maintain these properties, again at the expense of taxpayers. The situation is untenable," added

Netshiswinzhe.

"Therefore, after years of trying to negotiate with such occupants, our patience has understandably run out, and our approach henceforth will be one of zero tolerance towards government officials."

But before anything happens, Netshiswinzhe said there would be a final grace period for all residential and commercial tenants to come forward and sort out their lease and rental statuses.

He said the grace period began this month and would run until May 31.

However, Netshiswinzhe was at pains to explain his department's failure to force

police officers to pay market-related rentals more than a year after the Labour Court ruled in their favour.

In 2011, the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru) took the Infrastructure Development Department to court to challenge its decision to force police officers to pay for living in government-owned houses.

At the time, Popcru argued that its members were entitled to stay in state properties at nominal rentals as a condition of their employment.

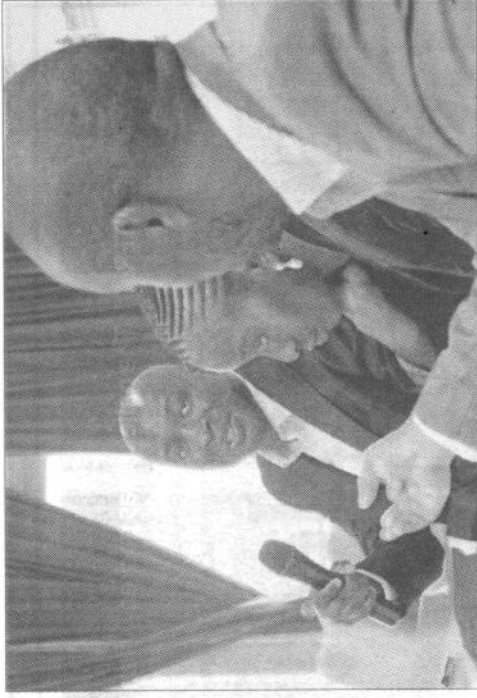
But on February 12 last year, the Labour Court dismissed Popcru's case. The court ruled that the police's relationship

with the department was that of lessor (landlord) and lessee (occupant) and not as employer and employee.

These police officers also still live in state houses for free, but according to Thulasizwe Nkabinde, the spokesman for Infrastructure Development MEC Qedani Mahlangu, his political boss failed to implement the Labour Court's decision as she was still "coming to grips with things in the department".

The Star initially exposed the illegal occupation in November 2010. In July 2011, the then MEC for infrastructure development, Bheki Nkosi,

vowed to take action against



POSER: Infrastructure development head of department Bethuel Netshiswinzhe and deputy director-general of property management Nomfundo Ngwenya

PICTURE: MOTSHWARI MOFOKENG

these public servants, but it never happened.

But, according to Netshiswinzhe, he was going to name and shame all those public servants.

"The tough measures we will take against such tenants at the end of the grace period

will include, but not be limited to, publishing the names of the government officials who are swindling the Gauteng taxpayer of millions of rand every year by living rent-free in state properties while using their own income for personal extravagances," he promised.