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New houses for ministers mooted

Current buildings 'too expensive to maintain'

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THE government is toying with the idea of building new homes for cabinet ministers because the current ones are getting old.

Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi told the Sunday Times this was being considered to avoid spending millions on renovations. He said new homes would be easier and cheaper to maintain.

Some of the ministerial houses are more than 60 years old and have been classified heritage properties. Repairing such houses could mean going to the expense of importing materials.

"The question is why would you want to keep something which costs you more in maintenance than to buy a new one?" said Nxesi. "We have done an assessment of all the heritage [houses], but once we have compiled a proper report we will take that [to the cabinet]."

The government has spent heavily on expensive renovations to the private home of the president in Nkandla and ministerial homes in Pretoria and Cape Town.

The Sunday Times reported in January that these renovations included R15-million spent on a Cape Town house allocated to Rural Development Minister Gugile Nkwinti, an overhaul to a house costing R10.67-million that was earmarked for Deputy Transport Minister Lydia Chikunga, and just

under R5-million on upgrades to a home allocated to Agriculture Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson.

The R200-million spent on renovating President Jacob Zuma's Nkandla homestead is being investigated. The upgrade included an underground bunker, AstroTurf fields, a tuck shop, clinic and homes for security personnel.

Nxesi has previously admitted that officials and contractors were fleecing the state by charging ex-

R15m

The amount spent on a Cape Town house allocated to Rural Development Minister Gugile Nkwinti

orbitant prices for renovations.

He warned that no decision to buy new homes could be taken if there was no plan for disposing of the old ones.

Bassie Kgasoane, chief director of the Department of Public Works' prestige unit — which manages ministerial and similar properties — said there were five houses in Pretoria and seven in Cape Town that had been classified as heritage buildings.

These include the Cecil John Rhodes Museum in Cape Town and the original house of the Reserve Bank governor in Pretoria.

Kgasoane said many of the door handles and window frames of the heritage buildings were made from the kind of copper that is not always available in South Africa.

"The principle of a heritage [building] is that when you fix it you must bring it to the same standard as it was. Some of the material the contractor says I can't source within the borders of South Africa — it will have to come from outside and you have to wait for that," he said.

"Meanwhile, public works plans to evict squatters from parliamentary villages and beef up security.

MPs are provided with accommodation in Cape Town when parliament is in session. They are allowed to bring their families.

But Nxesi said lax controls had led to people taking advantage by staying in the villages illegally. This includes the children of former MPs and many who bring friends and relatives to occupy the homes and stay for free.

He said there were reports, although unconfirmed, that some of the MPs living in three-bedroom houses were renting out rooms for extra cash.

"It is something we must investigate," he said.

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