

Another R132m 'Nkandla' sinkhole

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It was supposed to be a centre where local and international visitors could learn about the rich Zulu cultural heritage, but, R132 million later, all work has been halted on a project that the DA is now calling a new Nkandla.

Even the Zulu royal family appears to have been angered by the project, which could prove to be a headache for the ANC. The party relies on the support of people living in traditional areas.

As a consequence of alleged corruption, the completion of the Enyokeni Cultural Precinct in Nongoma, 300km from Durban in northern KwaZulu-Natal, could end up costing more than the upgrades undertaken at President Jacob Zuma's home in Nkandla.

Allen Grootboom, the DA's spokesperson on arts and culture, said: "The scale of the corruption, at a time when the construction is not even half finished, already looks as if its going to exceed that at Nkandla."

The Enyokeni project was approved by the department of arts and culture in 2014 after a request from King Goodwill Zwelithini, who expressed the need for such a project to officials from the department in September 2013.

Zwelithini argued that there was a need for housing and other facilities for the hundreds of girls who came to the annual reed dance, which attracts local and international visitors.

The project was supposed to have been built in two phases. Phase one would focus on infrastructure development and was supposed to be completed in September 2014. In phase two, the entire cultural precinct would have been completed.

Rapport, City Press' sister newspaper, visited Nongoma on Friday and, apart from a partially completed amphitheatre near the Enyokeni palace, only found a sign near another partially completed building indicating that it was the Enyokeni Cultural Precinct.

The name of construction company Basil Read appears on the board, but nobody was available to explain the extent of the involvement of the company yesterday.

Security at the palace is strict. To see the palace up close, visitors have to make arrangements at least two weeks in advance, according to an official who introduced herself as Nondiwe.

As was the case during the Nkandla scandal, questions have now arisen about the development of private projects on cultural ground. Large-scale corruption has allegedly been uncovered and recommendations have been made that those involved be criminally prosecuted.

Rapport understands that there was initially no budget for the project, but that it was still approved by the director-general of the department, Sibusiso Xaba.

In the 2013/14 financial year, money from infrastructure projects that were showing slow growth and that would have led to underexpenditure was channelled to the Enyokeni project.

The Independent Development Trust received R132 million for the project. The trust helps government with infrastructure management and the implementation of

programmes. However, consultants, who were allegedly appointed irregularly, got away with about R20 million before the trust was appointed to manage the project.

Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa stopped all work on the project when these irregularities came to light. Xaba was suspended in October 2014 and a forensic investigation into the project was launched.

The department discussed this report with the parliamentary portfolio committee on arts and culture in a meeting on November 8.

It was so secretive that members of the portfolio committee were asked to take an oath of confidentiality.

The week before last, the department of arts and culture reported to Parliament that apart from the R132 million that had already been spent - a further R28.1 million had been budgeted for the completion of the

amphitheatre near the entrance to the palace.

The committee was informed that the Hawks were investigating a criminal case. Criminal charges against Xaba have been recommended, even though he has already broken his ties with the department.

A firm was also appointed to determine the value of the infrastructure. The agreement with the Independent Development Trust was also cancelled, based on findings contained in the forensic report to the effect that the department had not received value for money.

Prince Thulani Zulu, the royal house's spokesperson, on Friday

said the king was unhappy with the progress of the project.

He said the minister had handed the forensic report to the king.

"The report shows that millions have been spent without work being done. The king is glad that they will be prosecuted," Zulu said.

Grootboom said this project, which is just a few hours away from Zuma's infamous private residence, would make the money spent on Nkandla seem insignificant in comparison.

He was also critical about the project itself, "which had nothing to do with the advancement of art, nation-building through social cohesion and socioeconomic inclusion - the vision of the department".

"It's aimed at the enrichment of a few individuals and to advance the Zulu culture, as per the instruction of the king and Zuma, at the state's expense."

The DA's Francois Rodgers in the KwaZulu-Natal legislature said the money disappeared into a bottomless pit.

"There is very little to show for the amount of money that was spent. To such an extent that even the king himself is complaining about all the money being allocated for the maintenance of his [six] palaces. If you look at what's happening on the ground, it is like another Nkandla."

The department of arts and culture had not responded to a request for comment by the time of going to print.

The department had previously argued that the project would be an embarrassment for government if it was left uncompleted, hence the further budget allocation of R28.1 million.

The king, who sometimes criticises the ANC, receives a budget from the office of the premier. Over the past three years, the budget was R54.2 million, R57.6 million and R48.8 million, respectively.

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