

No cutting the fat as minister gets R700 000 braai

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By BABALO NDENZE

● Taxpayers have forked out almost R700 000 to build a braai area for a cabinet minister. It's part of multimillion-rand spending spree to keep members of President Jacob Zuma's executive in the comfort they have become accustomed to.

None of the MPs, including those of the main opposition parties, disapproved of the spending when it was tabled in parliament, although the amounts were discovered only later.

Details are in a Public Works Department report tabled in parliament this week. These reveal that the government will spend R48-million on new houses for six ministers, at

R8-million a house, in Cape Town.

The report was "quickly" presented to the portfolio committee this week and its contents were not discussed by MPs.

No details were available on the braai area.

Bassie Kgasoane, the chief director of prestige property at public works, said his department spent R675 911 on the braai.

"Plans differ from house to house but then you find... you want to standardise facilities like your swimming pools," he said.

A former public works employee who previously dealt with houses for ministers and officials said ministers tended to make outrageous and costly requests.

"These guys are full of demands. We once

had to hire space somewhere because one minister's clothes could not fit into his wardrobe when he moved in," said the official who asked not to be named.

Those involved in government construction said the spending on the unknown minister's braai was exorbitant. They claimed that R675 911 was enough to build at least 11 two-bedroom RDP houses.

These revelations come as the public purse is shrinking amid a declining economy, with the government scrambling to find money to fund other priorities like the proposed provision of free tertiary education.

One of the houses to be procured has been earmarked for Deputy Minister of Economic Development Madala Masuku.

He has been living in a rented house in Cape Town since his appointment in 2014.

DA spokesman Malcolm Figg said he almost fell off his chair when he saw the amount the department had spent on the braai.

"I nearly did a backward somersault when I heard they're spending more than R600 000 for a braai facility," said Figg.

"When the officials tabled the report [in the committee] they went through it so quickly, but luckily I can read. I will be asking for more information."

Figg said buying six ministerial houses was unacceptable.

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"It's a total waste of taxpayers' money and we are not going to tolerate it. It's unacceptable. But fortunately only one house has been bought," said Figg.

Kgasoane said the procurement of the six houses was necessary because renting was not a sustainable option, with troublesome landlords presenting a risk.

"A risk is that owners can come back tomorrow and say: 'Hey chief, I want to go back into my house.'"

The documents also showed that public works has forked out more than R109-million renovating the Rygersdal apartment complex in Rondebosch in the southern suburbs of Cape Town where government officials live. The renovations included a new guardhouse, replacement of two lifts, a generator and electrical reticulation.

Since the Zuma administration took over in 2009, at least 35 houses have been procured between July 2009 and early 2011 at a cost of around R193-million. This excludes the cost of upgrades, furnishings and security.

The prestige project has long been controversial. Three years ago the department and the Special Investigating Unit investigated how renovations to 11 ministerial homes at the time could have cost R100-million, about R9-million for each property.