

Presidential house still 'not habitable'

Sihle Manda

THE JL Dube Presidential House in Durban has been condemned as unfit for habitation despite R40 million being pumped into renovations the year Jacob Zuma became head of state.

Plans are already at an advanced stage to pour in a further R10m to revamp the home, which would bring the total spend on renovations to R50m since 2009.

Newly appointed presidency spokesperson Khusela Diko said that only 15% of the house was habitable despite the multimillion-rand investment in its facelift.

The structure is considered so dangerous that large parts have been secured to prevent their use.

“The balance of the house has been condoned off, and no one can utilise it,” said Diko.

Three months ago, the Department of Public Works appointed a contractor to do “general repairs” to the house after it was damaged by floods in April 2016.

At the time, the house was deemed “temporarily unfit for human habitation”.

Despite this, former President Jacob Zuma in his last days in office hosted Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta in the house during a three-day state visit.

JL Dube House is the third presidential house, the others being Mahlamba Ndlopfu in Pretoria and Genadendal in Cape Town. All three houses are national key points.

It is understood that the latest renovations and repairs were expected to be done on the main house, the housekeeper’s flat and the guest house, along with the replacement of the roof of the house manager’s house.

Security installations were also expected to be conducted.

This was confirmed by Public Works spokesperson Thami Mchunu, who said the project was expected to take eight months.

The Mercury’s sister paper, The Star, has it on good

authority that a Durban-based construction company was appointed as contractor in January.

The project comes after the house received a R40m renovation in 2009.

Asked why it had taken two years to fix the house, Mchunu said comprehensive investigations and feasibility studies had to be done before construction could start.

“When the storm damage occurred, the site was secured by boarding up the broken glass panels and windows in the tower and skylight to avoid any further damage,” he said.

Mchunu said a second investigation was instituted after it was discovered that further repairs to the roof structures were required after wood borer infestation was found.

Damage

He defended the decision to let Zuma host Kenyatta in a house declared not fit for habitation, saying the storm damage had not affected the entire building.

“It was only the upper deck, the dome and the staircase areas. Certain areas of the residence remained usable, for instance to hold meetings.”

To ensure heritage aspects of the facility were not compromised, Mchunu said, “the Heritage Council in KZN was approached for inputs and approval of the repairs”.

DA MP Malcolm John Figg said he had asked for clarify on the project from the department through a parliamentary question. He raised concern at the price tag, saying the place had been renovated a few years ago.

ANC MP and Parliament’s Public Works committee chairperson, Humphrey Mmemenzi, said he was unable to comment on the project as the committee had not been briefed on it.

The residence was formerly known as King’s House, but was in 2012 renamed after the founding ANC president, John Langalibalele Dube.

The Edwardian-style presidential house was built in 1904.