

Municipality to take over buildings

Bheki Mbanjwa

THE eThekweni municipality is preparing to take over control of three dilapidated buildings in the inner city to kick-start inner city regeneration.

It emerged at an exco meeting yesterday that the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Public Works intends to donate three buildings to the municipality.

These are the West Point Lodge on Margaret Mncadi Avenue (Victoria Embankment), the Palm Beach Hotel on Gillespie Street and the Durban Seaman's Institute on Mahatma Gandhi (Point) Road.

The city is planning to spend just over R5 million to revitalise the buildings and then sell them to private developers and use proceeds for social housing units "at strategic locations".

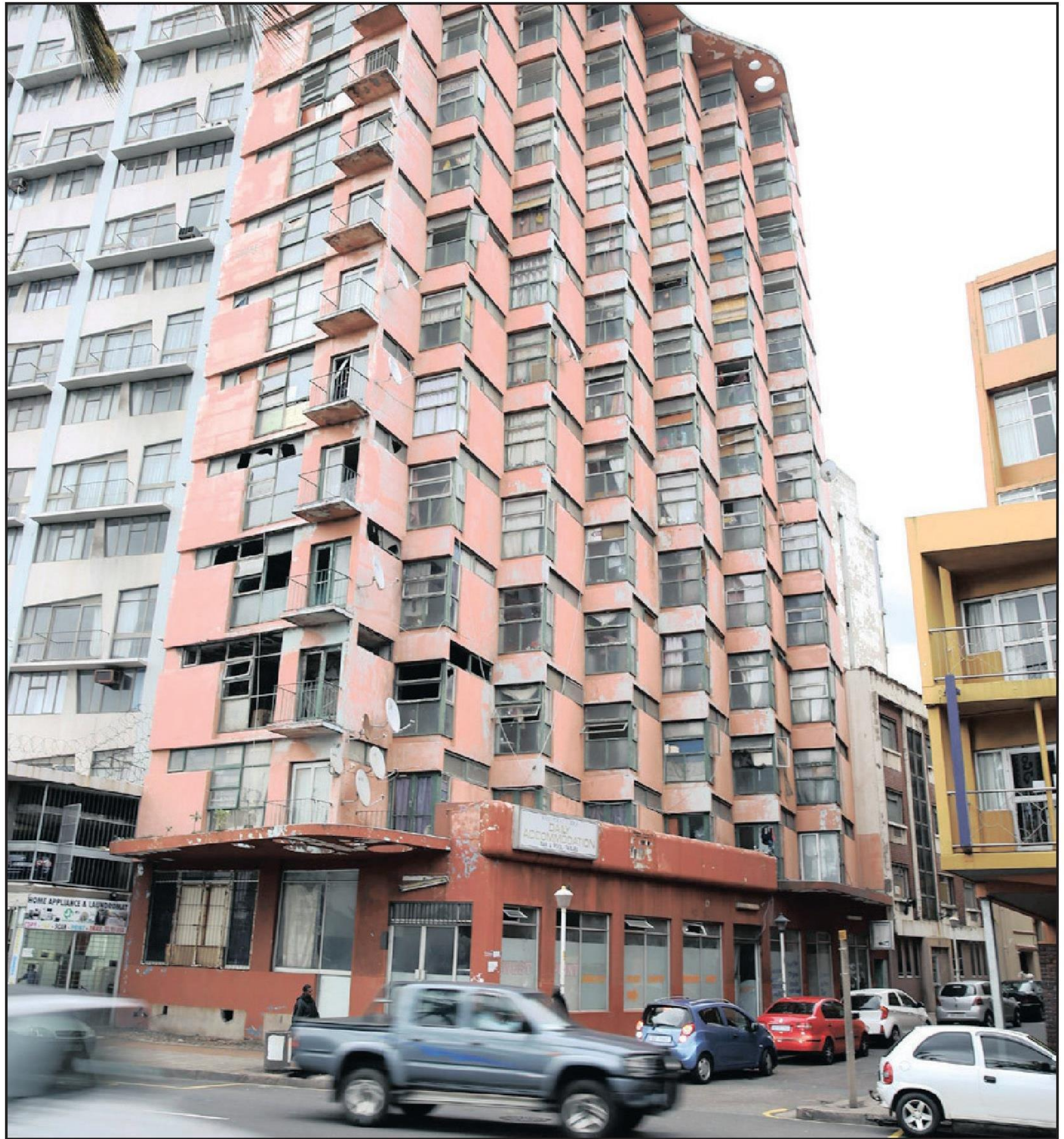
These buildings were part of 23 properties bought by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Human Settlements in 2003.

The intention was to have them used for social housing, but an investigation later revealed that the deal was corrupt as a senior official at the department had colluded with an estate agent to inflate the values of the property.

Since then the buildings have deteriorated, some of them are said to be without electricity and inhabited by vagrants.

West Point Lodge was condemned in 2012 after a fire swept through the building, claiming the lives of two toddlers, and since then offers to various universities for the building to house student accommodation were turned down.

Phillip Sithole, the deputy manager responsible for economic development, said once the city had control of the buildings it would come up with commercial mixed-use concepts for them, like converting them into hotels. They would then be sold to developers, with proceeds of the sales being pumped back into the city's housing initiatives.



The eThekweni municipality is preparing to take control of the West Point Lodge on Margaret Mncadi Avenue (Victoria Embankment) and two other derelict buildings in a bid to revive the inner city.

PICTURE: MOTSHWARI MOFOKENG/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY (ANA)

Addressing exco, Sithole said eyesore buildings in the city centre had the potential to drive away investors.

"If a person is here and is from Japan, he or she does not know that this building is owned by the province. He or she just sees a mess," he said.

Mayor Zandile Gumede welcomed the move, saying some of these buildings had been invaded by the "wrong elements". "We need to go ahead and accept the donation so that we can decisively deal with all bad buildings. We hope this donation will go a long way in

solving our housing problems in the inner city," she said.

The DA, however, abstained from voting after demanding details about the donation.

DA caucus leader Nicole Graham wanted to know if there was a plan to re-house the tenants who were currently living in the buildings, and who would bear the costs for that.

"Obviously it will cost us a lot of money to rehabilitate those buildings. We support the idea of social housing but I am sure a lot of details have to be worked out," she said.

This was echoed by Heinz de Boer, who said there were legal considerations to be made as the city "cannot go and just kick those people out".

The IFP supported the proposal, with its representative at exco, Mdu Nkosi, saying it was a good move as there were many buildings in the city which had become a haven for "hooligans".

Spokesperson for the Department of Human Settlements and Public Works Mbulelo Baloyi said discussions over the fate of the buildings were still ongoing.