

Minister identifies thousands of hectares for land reform

Mayibongwe Maqhina

THE PUBLIC Works Department has identified parcels of land and properties for land reform and social housing, including student accommodation.

Briefing the media before tabling the department's budget yesterday, Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi said 3 500 hectares will be released to the Human Settlements Department and 22 000ha have been identified for land reform.

The Higher Education and Training Department has been supplied with a list of possible buildings and a joint task team

established to expedite the matter.

"Almost all universities have a crisis with accommodation," Nxesi told the media. "We will work on a proper model to use and we have to move very fast." He said the department will lease out or dispose off unutilised properties valued at R7.4 billion.

"This list will be advertised on open tender, culminating in a national property marketing and investment conference to be held within the next six months," he said.

He said the department's negotiating team with National Treasury will review all leases to ensure that the government gets value for money and does not pay above market rates.

"We are moving away from reliance on leasing-in to utilising state-owned properties – starting with the security cluster."

This will require partnerships and investment from the private sector.

Nxesi said the department was targeting 75% of procurement to go to designated groups and 33% of new leases to go to B-BBEE companies.

Nxesi, however, offered a word of caution to the tenderpreneurs. "This is not an invitation to radical economic looting whereby a few politically-connected syndicates receive huge contracts, in return providing minimal service.

"Rather, we will be targeting emerging

black entrepreneurs in the property and construction space who offer a real value proposition and tangible benefits to the government."

Nxesi said the department and the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) would soon report back on some of the successful outcomes of investigations started some years ago.

The SIU is seeking to recover R1.2bn as a result of irregular or fraudulent transactions. "Investigations into the cost of maintenance by the department's anti-corruption unit has uncovered over 16 000 suspicious payments to the value of R2bn.

"We are calling for the extension of an existing proclamation to enable the SIU to

investigate the matter," Nxesi said.

Senior managers and officials in high risk positions will undergo lifestyle audits.

The department also hopes to wrap up the litigation involving Nkandla architect Minenhle Makhanya later this year.

Imtiaz Fazel, the department's deputy director-general for governance, said the attorneys for SIU, the department and Makhanya have been engaged in case management in preparation for the trial.

He said disciplinary hearings for five officials implicated in the scandal were outstanding, after seven officials were slapped with written warnings and suspension without pay.