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Public Works earmarks property worth R7.5bn for letting and sale

By Bekezela Phakathi

The Department of Public Works is in the process of categorising R7.5bn worth of unused properties for letting and permanent disposal.

The state has a property portfolio of more than 93,000 buildings under the custodianship of public works.

Critics of the drive to amend section 25 of the Constitution to allow for expropriation without compensation often argue that the state should focus on redistributing land under its ownership, some of which is unaccounted for or underused.

"Properties that are surplus to the needs of government shall be used to generate revenue and such will be advertised on an open tender basis," said Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi in a written reply to a question from the DA.

Nxesi said land and properties continued to be identified for land reform and social housing, including student accommodation. "We have supplied higher education... with a list of buildings and established a joint task team to expedite the matter. [A total] 3,500ha are to be released to human settlements... [and] some 22,000ha have been identified for restitution and land reform," the minister said.

One percent of land

DA MP Malcolm Figg said the department had land and property holdings worth over R12bn that are lying idle. The department had only released 1% of the land

it owns, which meant that it would continue to pay rates and taxes for large underutilised properties, said Figg.

"That's the reason we oppose expropriation without compensation... the government owns more than 1.9-million hectares and over 12,000 properties which are underutilised... how can they want to expropriate more land without compensation when they are failing to manage properties they already own? More land owned by the state should be made available for land reform," said Figg.

Last week the Department of Public Works said it would be approaching the courts in a bid to recoup more than R1.2bn from tenderpreneurs in over-stated payments and other irregular transactions in the government lease portfolio.

In May President Cyril Ramaphosa authorised the Special Investigating Unit to investigate several municipalities and government departments, including public works, for fraud and corruption.

phakathib@businesslive.co.za