

R26M SPENT ON MINISTERS' HOMES

● Outcry over R9m house
● MP compares expenditure to Nkandla

LUXURY: Ministers live well in this R9m house in Waterkloof, Pretoria, in a country with a weak economy.
PICTURE: THOBILE MATHONSI/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY/ANA

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ON THE day it was exposed at the state capture commission that tender rules were subverted to benefit companies, it has emerged that the government splurged more than R26 million on four posh houses for ministers in the last two financial years – with R500 000 blown on braai entertainment areas.

Angry MPs yesterday confronted Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi on the morality of spending millions on luxurious houses – the most expensive being R9m – for ministers in the face of the soaring cost of living for citizens caused by fuel increases and slow economic growth.

Yesterday, it was revealed to the parliamentary standing committee on public accounts (Scopa)

that the department had during the 2016/2017 financial year bought two ministerial houses in Graskop, outside Pretoria, for R6.7m and R4.5m, and another for R9m in Club Avenue in the leafy suburb of Waterkloof.

The department also spent R6.3m for a house in Sandton and R6.8m to buy another ministerial house in Milnerton, Cape Town.

The government has, over the years, also come under fire for wasting money on bling cars.

Scopa chairperson Themba Godi said such large amounts could not be spent on houses and entertainment areas.

“Scopa is concerned about how the department has spent almost half a million rand in braai entertainment areas in ministerial houses. The committee is concerned about what seems to be a priority for government. Is it really necessary to spend that kind of money just for a braai area for a cabinet minister?”

“Scopa is also worried about how the houses allocated to ministers and deputy ministers are utilised. The state is spending exorbitant amounts of taxpayers’ money on buying and maintaining these houses when some of them aren’t even being used by ministers or deputy ministers,” Godi said.

Scopa has requested the department to provide the committee with a report on how much each of the 148 houses owned by the state was costing the government in maintenance, rates and taxes for the past two financial years.

Godi said the committee was concerned about the lack of a cap for the purchasing of ministerial houses, with one costing as much as R9m, while other ministers live in houses worth about R4m.

“What informs the purchasing

for these houses? It is really concerning that the department has no manual for those kinds of purchases. Scopa’s contention is that it is inherent in this department to attract all sorts of characters who want to make a quick buck.”

IFP MP Mkhuleko Hlengwa slated the spending on ministerial houses, saying this was a slap in the face of ordinary South Africans.

“When you’re here on a hot day you see big ministerial cars outside. They are all running because people sitting in there want to run the aircon, in a climate which is expensive for South Africans who can’t afford the cost of fuel. The next phase becomes these houses.

“There is no justification for this luxurious splurging. If prestige is going to be an abuse, then we have to revisit it. We can’t pretend as if the economic conditions of this country are made for us to pre-

tend that we are in the First World. This is how Nkandla happened,” Hlengwa said.

The department’s director-general, Sam Vukela, defended the spending of R500 000 on braai areas and millions on houses.

“These are not braai areas per se but a facility that has a braai in it. This means it is more of an entertainment area.

“On the houses, we are satisfied that what we are paying was within the market value. In some instances we were able to negotiate the amounts to a lower level,” Vukela said.

He said that when purchasing a ministerial house, for the house to meet their specification criteria it must have four to six bedrooms, a double garage, sufficient parking to accommodate about four vehicles, as well as a study room. The kitchen must have a pantry, and

there must be an entertainment area (braai area).

The house must also have a high wall with electric fence and cameras.

Nxesi agreed with the committee, after a grilling, that there must be changes in the costs of ministerial houses.

“There was a question raised about the morality of spending these millions. Clearly the issue of the limits and whatever goes to the ministers needs a radical review in terms of the ministerial handbook, but unfortunately that review cannot be done by the officials,” Nxesi said.

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