

## ON THE SPOT

# De Lille addresses property professionals

**R**ecently appointed public works and infrastructure minister Patricia de Lille addressed professionals working in the commercial property industry at the launch of the Property Sector Charter Council's (PSCC's) 2019 State of Transformation of the Property Sector report on Thursday. She spoke with Business Day about her views of the sector.

**Should the public be worried about the state of transformation in property in this country?**

Having been in my role as minister for a fairly short period so far, I can say that this sector, like many others, needs to be transformed. Black people owning property and participating in the economy is important and my department will meet with the PSCC more than twice a year so we can discuss how transformation can be achieved and what programmes are and aren't working.

**What are your priorities with respect to private property companies?**

I want to push more public-private sector partnerships. There are fundamentals within the economy which need to change. These are things like land and property ownership. I want the work of the department of public works to benefit as many South Africans as possible. There needs to be better collaboration between



**ALISTAIR ANDERSON**

everyone.

**The SA construction industry lost 142,000 jobs in the first quarter of 2019. What can the department of public works do to improve the struggling industry?**

In the past many tenders have been delayed, which has put lots of pressure on construction companies, especially smaller ones. Delayed payments have also sent some construction companies out of business. We are committing R5bn for 300 infrastructure projects which we believe will give construction companies many opportunities across the country.

**Should the department of public works encourage different ways of doing construction in SA, as well as the use of different materials?**

Any change in how factories or manufacturing plants operate needs to be done with job preservation in mind. There are many discussions about this currently between the department of public works and other parties.

In terms of the use of materials, we work very closely with standards bureaus and

groups like AgriSA which look at nonstandardised products to find building materials which are better for the environment than traditional materials. I recently saw the testing of a new type of brick. Whatever the construction industry does, it has to bear the effects of its work on the environment, climate change and job preservation.

**How strong is the skills base at the department of public works?**

We work with a very low skills base. We want to improve this and provide more training over the next few years. However, right now whatever work we do and projects we embark on have to include people with a lack of skills.

**Your department owns about 90,000 buildings. Would you consider converting non- or low-functioning buildings into housing to alleviate the country's housing shortage, perhaps affordable housing?**

We own an enormous number of assets and we don't have up-to-date information about all of them. We have assigned a private company to help us ascertain information about our asset register, then we can work out what we will do with specific buildings, land and other assets. My one issue, though, is that we need to improve the relationships between my department and our user departments.

We could go and convert our buildings to be used by smaller

departments but at this point user departments owe the department of public works R3.2bn in rent.

I also want to improve the rollout of repairs and maintenance across our assets. I only have a budget of R2.3bn for this, which is shocking.

**Are there any specific buildings which need upgrades, repairs and maintenance?**

Yes, I want to start with the courts. I have been meeting with the heads of our courts, and some are in an horrific state. The aircon at the Johannesburg high court hasn't worked for 10 years. That's unacceptable.

After the courts, I want to fix the police stations. Telkom sold a building for R600m to the department of public works a few years ago.

Those costs have run up to R1.6bn and the police are still not in the building.

We have failed dismally in many ways as a government, especially with respect to the repairs and maintenance of our buildings.

**When can the public expect results?**

I am here for the long haul. I have given my cell number out at this conference and I want people whose leases are long overdue for renewal to phone me. I'll get them signed. If they witness bribery or corruption they must phone me immediately and report it to me. I am here to take action as a minister of this country.