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New beds give MPs extra spring

By **THABO MOKONE**

● The government has splurged millions on pampering MPs at state-owned houses in Cape Town, including splashing out nearly R1.8m on new beds in 2019, spending R1.6m on transport for them and their children and sprucing up their houses to the tune of R51m.

Much of the spending took place even as the government committed itself to austerity and "trimming the fat", and while tens of thousands of people lost their jobs during the pandemic.

The department of public works, which is responsible for the upkeep of houses in the parliamentary villages, for which MPs pay nominal rentals, provided the details in answer to questions from the Sunday Times.

The disclosures follow recent reports of plans to scrap the R5,000 ceiling on the portion of ministers' utility bills that the state pays and allow ministers and deputies unlimited free lights and water.

President Cyril Ramaphosa said earlier this month he would cancel these plans and amend the Ministerial Handbook that spells out the privileges that members of the executive are entitled to.

The new disclosures about perks could fuel further public indignation over the way MPs benefit from taxpayers' money over and above their salaries. An ordinary MP earns more than R1m a year while a minister earns just over R2.4m, with their deputies pocketing a little over R2m.

They also enjoy generous car and cell-phone allowances, food subsidies at parliament's restaurants, and free flights for spouses and children.

Others being pampered by the taxpayer are 28 directors-general of government departments, who occupy state houses and sea-view flats in posh Cape Town suburbs such as Mouille Point, where they pay a paltry R75 a month in rent and enjoy free electricity and water.

MPs pay R207 a month in rent for their homes in parliamentary villages such as Acacia Park in Goodwood, Laboria Park in Belhar and Pelican Park in Strandfontein.

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Bedding legislators runs to at least R54m

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Ministers pay R1200 a month as rent for their allocated houses in Pretoria and Cape Town.

The provision of free water and electricity at official houses of ministers and their deputies in Cape Town and Pretoria would have cost R14m a year, the department of public works & infrastructure (DPWI) said.

"To date since January 2022, DPWI has paid R1616,545 to ferry MPs from [parliamentary villages] to parliament and to ferry their dependants ... to various schools and back," said public works spokesperson Thami Mchunu.

"DPWI has spent R1787,514 to procure new beds for all MPs in 2019."

Mchunu did not respond to further questions, including how many beds had been bought for MPs and what mode of transport was used to take their children to school.

Parliament has 400 MPs, 64 of them serving as ministers and deputy ministers who do not stay in parliamentary villages.

This suggests that public works may have spent about R5,300 a bed for 336 MPs – assuming that they all took up accommodation in parliamentary villages, though some opt not to reside there.

Wayne Duvenage, CEO of the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (Outa), expressed outrage that public funds were used to take the children of parliamentarians to school.

"No, this is madness man," he said.

Duvenage said it was time for the government and civil society to hold a national dia-



Leon Schreiber, a DA MP on the public service & administration committee.

logue on the kind of benefits dished out to public representatives, given the state of the economy, poverty levels and rising social inequality.

"This is citizens' money that they are spending and they have no thought about how to save money; how to stop this sense of entitlement."

"These funds could be put to much better use in dealing with pit latrines, bucket toilets, bridges over rivers to get kids to school. Think of all the problems we have and we

have to waste money like this. It's unacceptable."

"Government must sit down with civil society and we must review the entire handbook, not only at ministerial and parliament level but in the provinces and local government area because they have their own handbooks."

Leon Schreiber, a DA MP on the public service & administration portfolio committee, said his party has been lobbying for parliamentary villages to be used for public benefit by converting them into social housing projects.

Schreiber said MPs should be given a subsidy to either rent or buy their own houses in Cape Town, which he argued would eliminate the huge costs related to the upkeep of parliamentary villages.

"Instead of blowing millions in taxpayer funds on everything from furniture to maintenance at these villages, MPs who do not live in Cape Town should receive a simple housing subsidy they can use for housing when required to be in Cape Town."

"This would entirely eliminate the possibility of forcing taxpayers to pay for roads, houses, furniture, schools and transport for MPs."

"It would also free up these vast tracts of well-located land to be used for housing the people instead of politicians."

He said he would submit a private member's bill in parliament that would seek transparency on the benefits enjoyed by all public office-bearers and ensure public participation in determining them.