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# R132K DINNER NOT GOING DOWN WELL

*MPs slam Minister Zikalala for insensitive 'networking event' amid tough economic times*

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THE Public Works and Infrastructure Department has come under fire for splashing out R132 000 to dine guests after Minister Sihle Zikalala delivered his maiden budget speech in the National Assembly.

The department has defended the event, saying stakeholder engagement was a key competency component of the department and was in its annual performance plan.

However, opposition MPs who were at the dinner saw nothing that justified so much money being spent from the public purse. Among them was IFP MP Sanele Zondo, who left after the speeches.

"The gala dinner, as an example of spending so much public money with nothing to provide the people, is just one way of sucking up public funds."

He said his party was unhappy with expenditure incurred, and questioned the money spent on the "normal cater-

ing". "There was catering and speeches. I can't find why it cost that much as it was normal catering," Zondo said.

He insisted that there was no need for the "networking dinner" as "it was a repetition of the budget speech, nothing new by the minister, the deputy minister and the director-general".

Opposition parties yesterday labelled the expenditure at the "networking dinner" as insensitive, especially when the country faced economic challenges amid high unemployment and many people going to bed hungry.

The details about the expenditure came to light after Zikalala responded to parliamentary questions from the DA's Madeleine Hicklin and EFF MP Mathapelo Siwisa, who asked about the networking dinner that was held on May 23.

Zikalala said the dinner at The Cresta Grande Hotel was part of the department's calendar.

"The budget vote events are earmarked to interact with sector stakeholders to share developments around

the policy imperatives and priorities of the department," he said. He would not say what the dinner cost per person other than to put the total cost at R132 457.60 for venue hire and dinner for 130 people.

Those who were on the guest list included "key sector stakeholders" such as entities, professional councils, identified beneficiaries from Expanded Public Works Programme projects, young professionals and bursary holders.

Oversight bodies such as members of the audit committee and members of the Portfolio Committee on Public Works and Infrastructure were also invited.

Zikalala said that the amount spent was from the line budget for venue hire under goods and services.

"The intended outcome was for information sharing and building cohesion within the sector on the implementation of cross-cutting programmes," said the minister when asked about the idea behind the networking session.

Asked about any benefit to the

department, the annual performance plans and key performance indicators the dinner fulfilled, Zikalala said: "Building strategic partnerships with sector stakeholders in promoting departmental outcome on integrated planning and co-ordination."

Zikalala's spokesperson Lennox Mabaso said yesterday: "The department views stakeholder engagement as an investment in building trust and explaining its vision and policies to those directly affected by the mandate of DPWI." He added that the department would continue to forge social compacts with stakeholders and address challenges in the property and construction sector.

Speaking to the *Cape Times*, Hicklin said it was scandalous that the department spent about R1 000 on a dinner for each of the 132 guests.

"The money could have been used to deliver on issues that they are not delivering on. It could have been used for EPWP training or building strategic partnerships outside the Department of Public Works, as opposed to looking at

patting themselves on the back for not meeting KPIs," she said.

Hicklin said it was the first time in her four years in Parliament that she had been invited to such an event.

"We decided that we were not going to support this event."

ACDP deputy leader Wayne Thring echoed Hicklin's sentiments that the money could have been better spent than on a networking dinner.

Thring, who was invited to the event but could not attend because he became aware of it on the budget vote day and received the invitation late, said the government had been telling the people to tighten their belts, only to do the opposite.

"The government has got to be a leader in how we spend public funds. Very clearly with the economic climate where so many people are unemployed in South Africa, with a high unemployment rate and 25% of the poor going to bed without a meal, I think that money could have been put to better use," Thring said.