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The Middelburg District Hospital is fast becoming a R1.8 billion white elephant. PHOTO: Enza Construction.

A R1.8 billion white elephant

Gerhard Rheeder

The Middelburg District Hospital is fast becoming a R1.8 billion white elephant.

The hospital is on the outskirts of the town, on a greenfield site that is readily accessible from the N4.

It will offer outpatient services, general care, a maternity unit, a 600-seat auditorium, accommodation for staff and students, a training centre, as well as a trauma unit – comprising of 220 beds in total.

The hospital has, however, been designed to accommodate an additional 130 beds, as the town continues on its growth rate of 6% per annum.

Residents are sceptical about the hospital's completion in light of the fact that the Mpumalanga Department of Health already struggles to keep the Middelburg State Hospital afloat, with staff and equipment shortages ravaging the institution the department says has become too minimalist to cater to Middelburg's healthcare needs.

The department struggles to retain health professionals who migrate to bigger metropolises due to better financial opportunities.

Contractors have shut down construction on multiple occasions due to non-payment and allegations of corruption.

According to Thoko Mashiane, ActionSA Mpumalanga chairperson, more than R1.4 billion has already been spent on construction. "The hospital, which was set to be completed in early 2020, is, to date, only 58 per cent complete, with the government

District hospital deadline extended to 2025 amid payment woes

continuously shifting goalposts at the expense of the taxpayer."

The department denies this and says despite months of inaction, completion is nearer 85 per cent, despite conceding that work has not resumed due to ongoing disputes over payment.

Mr Mashiane confirmed that construction had been halted pending an investigation by the Auditor-General into spending.

According to an AG report, project management withdrew from the project after a scathing audit outcome, in which a number of financial issues had been flagged.

In the latest report tabled in the Provincial

Public Works Portfolio Committee after an oversight visit to the hospital in March this year, legislature members found that the contractor did not meet standard Infrastructure Unit Support System requirements, but was appointed on its lower rates during the tender bidding process.

Committee members also found that non-payment for professional services resulted in a breakdown of quality control on-site, with contractor Enza Construction only willing to resume construction after full settlements of debts by the public works.

Construction costs have since ballooned from R1.4 billion to R1.6 billion, with the department estimating that final costs will stand at R1.8 billion.

The project started in July 2017, with the department expecting site handover by November 2025.

The department further conceded that the contractor appointed for the supply and installation of medical equipment is still in the process of appointing subcontractors. The committee recommended the "fast-track" of payments to meet the November 2025 deadline.

With the problems plaguing the project, local healthcare professionals fear that "doctors and other staff should think twice before boarding a sinking ship".