



Publication: SundayTimesGauteng - Main
Title: R400k to kill pests at minister's house
Publish date: 21 May 2023
Page: 1

Reach: 125000
AVE: R 69003.00
Author: Thabo Mokone

R400k to kill pests at minister's house

By THABO MOKONE

● The government spent almost R400,000 on pest control at one minister's house in just three months as part of a R93m splurge – at taxpayers' expense – on sprucing up cabinet members' official residences between 2019 and 2022.

Just over R1.4m of that went on a pricey facelift for a Victorian house in Cape Town's Upper Kenilworth, including painting inside and out, upgrades to the kitchen and repairs to the floor covering.

This was revealed this week by public works & infrastructure minister Sihle Zikalala in a written reply to questions from DA MP Leon Schreiber.

Yesterday, Zikalala told the Sunday Times he would launch an inquiry into what "appears to be hugely inflated prices" to "clean up the government's property maintenance programme". He said he would inform President Cyril Ramaphosa of the measures.

Public works paid an unnamed company just over R79,000 to exterminate pests at one ministerial home on three separate dates in November 2021. The following month, on December 10, the department paid the same amount to the same company for work at the same home, and again the next month on January 24 2022.

Sources in the pest control industry suggested public works spending R400,000 to fumigate just one house was excessive.

Two leading national pest control companies told the Sunday Times on Friday that it should not cost more than R5,000 to eliminate cockroaches and rodents in a three- or four-bedroomed house with outside staff quarters, which is the size of a



Public works and infrastructure minister Sihle Zikalala.

typical ministerial home.

"For R4,066 we spray pesticides in the entire house to kill both cockroaches and rodents. For rodents we also put down bait boxes containing poison for the outside area," said one consultant.

"Were they using French cologne to fumigate that house?" Joked a government official.

Zikalala's parliamentary reply revealed further generous spending on luxuries for ministers and their families, such as:

- At least R3.4m on the maintenance of swimming pools and water features on 388 occasions between 2019 and 2022;
- R25,000 a month, or R2.1m in total, on diesel for generators at the 71 ministerial homes in Pretoria;
- R454,000 on installing a generator at a ministerial residence in Moreleta Park, Pretoria;
- More than R470,000 on repairing an intercom and security camera at a ministerial home in Houghton Estate, Johannesburg; and

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Publication: SundayTimesGauteng - Main
Title: R93m splurged on luxuries for ministers
Publish date: 21 May 2023
Page: 10

Reach: 125000
AVE: R 60885.00
Author: Thabo Mokone

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● R1.6m on fixing leaking roofs of ministerial houses in the Bryntirion estate next to the Union Buildings in Pretoria.

An executive at a top kitchen design outlet said it was “normal” for modern kitchen upgrades to cost as much as R1m, depending on the type of finishes chosen.

“I did a deal the other day for a million. It’s not the size, it’s the finishes,” she said, preferring to remain anonymous.

But the spending has been slammed as “in very poor taste” given the country’s dire economy and attempts to curtail pay increases for civil servants.

“Our country simply cannot afford to keep paying for lifestyles of ministers who live like rock stars while load-shedding, unemployment and poverty are at crisis levels,” said Schreiber.

A construction service provider who asked to remain anonymous said the expenditure on waterproofing appeared to be inflated. “We see this every day. I don’t think the pricing is by service providers but by corrupt officials who insist on price inflation so that they can get kickbacks,” he said.

Zikalala said the “costs of some of these items are not justifiable and smack of mischief by service providers who seem to have identified the department of public works as a milk cow”.

“This puts a stain on public representatives and portrays them as if they have sanctioned such procurement. We have a duty to lead by example and set the right tone in spending public monies.

“We are alive to the reality that everyone is facing a financial squeeze because of the rise of the cost of living. We therefore need to ensure that we take good care of public money.”

Zikalala, a former premier of KwaZulu-Natal, said no minister had a say in the multi-million-rand public works spree.

“We wish to assure the public that there is no political principal who is involved with the excessive finishes and all of us as government abhor any excessive conduct with taxpayers’ money, especially at this time when we are deploying resources to core services.”

The supply of free electricity, water and other municipal services to ministerial homes in Cape Town and Pretoria cost taxpayers R43m between 2020 and 2022.

“This means that the government spent an average of nearly R1m on each mansion in just two years. The expenses incurred were for renovations, repairs, municipal rates and services including free water and electricity,” said Schreiber.

Schreiber added that he would seek a parliamentary investigation into the public works department’s maintenance programmes while pushing his “cut cabinet perks bill” in the legislature.

Zikalala said he would table other measures to tackle corruption and other forms of wrongdoing in his department when he presents his spending plans for the financial year 2023/2034 in parliament on Tuesday.

In March, it emerged the department of public works spent R7m last year installing generators at ministerial homes to cushion politicians from load-shedding – while most ordinary citizens remained in darkness.