



Publication: Tygerburger Table View - Main
Title: R250 million Robben Island upgrade
Publish date: 28 Jun 2023
Page: 13

Reach: 30065
AVE:R 26338.16
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R250 million Robben Island upgrade

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Robben Island residents rely on water from the mainland in Cape Town for consumption and make use of boreholes as the desalination plant on the island remains unfixed.

The plant has been inoperable since February this year.

The desalination plant and several other buildings requiring maintenance were pointed out to Sihle Zikalala, Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure, during a site inspection of the island on Thursday 22 June.

Avelino Rocha, facilities manager for the department, says fixing the plant has been challenging because the equipment is not locally produced.

“Nothing is locally sourced; everything must be imported. We repair what is broken. As we repair the membrane, we see that the pump is faulty or the valve is rusted. These are all factors adding to the delay of (getting) the plant up and running.”

Rocha says they also make use of borehole pumps.

“We also have borehole pumps. The same service provider that we have here, they decant water to all the tourist spots with tanks and pumps. So there is water on the island but if you want to drink the water, you drink from the mainland.”

According to Zikalala, to date, the department has spent R112 million on maintenance on the island.

Prof Saths Cooper, Robben Island Museum chair, says the total cost of refurbishments and infrastructure amounts to over R250 million.

Zikalala says upgrades set to be done

through the Department of Arts and Culture include:

- The restoration of the Blue Stone Quarry wall;
- a harbour precinct upgrade;
- a desalination plant upgrade;
- an effluent plant upgrade;
- a new floating jetty;
- a diesel plant reticulation;
- restoration and conservation of the built environment; and
- an upgrade of the bulk services/new plants.

Zikalala says: “We want to ensure that this area is preserved as it was but in a modernised way. And the legacy it has and the manner in which it brings inspiration to society.

It will require us to ensure that it is preserved in a high quality.”

The minister adds that concerns regarding asbestos roofing will also be addressed.

“We are going to continue going forward. The Department of Public Works and Infrastructure has conducted an assessment on the issue of asbestos here. We have conducted that assessment and we will sit down with the relevant department and see whether we are able to repair the asbestos.”

Cooper says the island experienced a difficult time during the Covid-19 pandemic. He says in the previous year, 55% of revenue was generated through visitors to the island. Cooper says in February next year – from Friday 2 until Sunday 11 – the island will celebrate 10 days of liberation history.

It will also mark the 34th anniversary of the late Nelson Mandela’s release from prison.