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The lights never go out at the new provincial hospital.

# Loadshedding: but lights never go out

## A R1.8 billion white elephant

**Matthew Handley**

The new provincial hospital is Middelburg's castle in the sky.

Occupying the space just past the Middelburg Mall, the hospital should serve as a beacon of hope, yet that hope has faded into misery.

The project is a visible R1.8 billion white elephant. Curiously, the lights of the building remain on throughout the night, even through load-shedding, shining like a dying star.

The *Middelburg Observer* reached out to the Department of Public Works, who stated, "The contractor is responsible for the security of the property and is currently responsible for the electricity bill."

Ironically, our current provincial hospital was without power earlier this year, despite all provincial hospitals having power through load-shedding. Life Midmed and the provincial hospital use generators to keep the electricity on.

The generator at the provincial hospital also malfunctioned, just as several people were brought in from an accident on the Van Dyksdrift road.

Having begun construction in July 2017, the initial completion target was 2019, this was then pushed back to December 2020, before being pushed even further to 2022. Now in October of 2023, the construction

is listed as having a completion target of November 2025, despite being 95 per cent complete.

These delays are the result of turmoil after turmoil regarding wages and allegations of corruption.

In 2019, project developers Enza Construction had workers gather at the Mpumalanga Division of the High Court over unpaid work, this led to two strikes and several sackings.

It seems that global development giant WSP have since become involved with the project, as they stated on their website, "Mpumalanga Provincial Government has commissioned our team to deliver a new Level 1 District Hospital that will offer a wide range of high-quality services. The new hospital will replace Middelburg Provincial Hospital, which is already straining to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population."

This statement of intent did not bring a change in fortune, as in 2022 production was halted again over non-payment of professional services, and production resumed until the Auditor-General concluded an investigation into the handling of the project.

Allegations of corruption were laid against the development, as it was revealed that the contractor had been appointed at lower rates during the tender bidding

process. This followed several financial issues that the Auditor-General had flagged, leading project management to withdraw.

Currently, all production of the hospital has stopped, as the provincial government has disputed the Auditor-General's claims and thus, until the matter is resolved in court, development has halted for the foreseeable future.

The hospital was commissioned due to the declining state of the current provincial hospital, so with each delay, people like 78-year-old Samuel Skosana are left helpless.

Earlier this year, Samuel contacted the *Middelburg Observer* for aid because he was left without his chronic medication for three months.

After each attempt to collect his medicine at the provincial hospital, he was told it was

unavailable, with no clear indication of why, or when it would be obtainable.

This type of incident is a recurring theme at the provincial hospital, with many residents filing complaints about the service and treatment they experience. Instead of focusing the budget on issues affecting our community today, money is going towards a stop-start project with no end date on the horizon.

Disputes with subcontractors have not stopped the scope of the project from expanding, as the new hospital was expected to have 220 beds at launch, this has now increased to roughly 350 beds due to population growth. In addition, there is set to be a 600-seater auditorium, accommodation for staff and students, fully functioning trauma and maternity units, general care and outpatient services, and a training centre.