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INTERNAL emails between Tourism Department director-general Victor Tharage and deputy director-general of Destination Development Shamilla Chettiar have laid bare the deteriorating relationship between the two officials in the department.

In 2019, the Auditor-General SA (AGSA) issued a qualified audit report with negative findings of fruitless, wasteful, and/or irregular expenditure against the department in 2018/19 in relation to the capital projects as part of the Expanded Public Works Programme. Five years later, there appears to be a conflict as to who must account for the report as various directors have been charged.

In October 2019, Lerato Matlakala (chief director, SRI), Jonga Kuhlana (director, planning) and Mbali Zama (director, systems) were placed on precautionary suspension amid a probe into alleged mismanagement concerning expenditure in the department.

In a letter to Chettiar and seen by the *Sunday Independent*, dated May 9, 2023, Tharage mentioned that he had requested that an individual assurance report on the capital projects be submitted to him, citing that the same people that were responsible for the 2018/19 wasteful and fruitless expenditure were still in charge of the project.

"These are the same officials who failed to provide AGSA with evidence on the projects they managed when AGSA requested such evidence.

"Noting that many of these projects are continuing under your direct management and leadership as the branch head accountable in terms of the Public Finance Management Act of 1999.

"The portfolio committee has also raised the issue with the fact that the same officials who managed some of the projects for which AGSA issued the negative audit outcome of fruitless, wasteful, and/or irregular expenditure continue to manage these projects," he wrote.

He asked that Chettiar advise as to which risk mitigation measures she, as DDG, had put in place to mitigate this risk and its associated risks. "You have not provided the individual assurance reports indicating areas where there are identified challenges with projects and stating what was done to address identified challenges, despite my previous requests," he added. "... Yet you did not provide the reasons for your non-submission nor did you request approval to submit these reports on later dates."

An earlier response from Chettiar to Tharage dated April 11, 2024, emphasised that the projects in question were historical projects that were implemented long before the establishment of the Destination Development branch that was created during a restructuring process in April 2017.

Chettiar told Tharage that his statement that these were projects that Destination Development managed at material times was inaccurate.

"Secondly, it is important to note that, at the time that the 2018/19 audit took place, the DDG Destination Development had been deployed to manage the MTSF process for the economic cluster.

"As a successor in title of the Expanded Public Works Programme, the DDG Destination Development has attended to all matters related to the implementation of infrastructure projects including the matters raised in the 2018/19 audit report."

On the question of risk mitigation measures she would put in place, Chettiar had proposed that the Development Bank of Southern Africa instituted penalties where implementers had fallen behind schedule or work was not up to standard.

Three directors at the Tourism Department – Matlakala, Kuhlana and Zama – have requested the Public Protector, Kholeka Gcaleka, to investigate Tharage for "abuse of power and failing in his duties". The trio alleged that Tharage was making them scapegoats for his failures.

Approached for comment, Tharage said he would not comment as investigations were currently under way.