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Rats invade filthy courts

Pietermaritzburg Magistrate's Court a health hazard for staff and visitors

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The dilapidated state of the Pietermaritzburg Magistrate's Court is creating a health hazard for staff, visitors and prisoners in the holding cells, who have to put up with leaking toilets, an infestation of rats and mould in the courtrooms.

It's not just a matter of inconvenience, say staff who work there, but also a health risk as several of them have fallen ill due to air-conditioners not working, poor ventilation and mould.

"It was over 30° celsius [recently] and the aircons were not working, there is no ventilation and it was just unbearable. The air conditioning is always not working.

"There are no windows so there is no circulation, which is why we are getting sick constantly," an employee said.

A passage that leads to the staff parking at the back of the building, near the case archives is flooded with toilet water. Loose bricks have been placed as stepping stones so that staff can reach the parking. Several courtrooms also have visible black mould growing on the walls due to rainwater seeping in.

"There is raw sewage flowing out the build-

ing into the parking area that we have to step into when we get in or out of our vehicles.

"The doors in certain courts don't close properly. The carpets in the courtroom are worn out, have holes and are very dusty, and it's contributing to us having breathing difficulties and other health issues.

"Apart from these problems, the court building is also infested with rodents and cockroaches. Something needs to be done about the infestation of the rats and cockroaches in the building and carpark.

"We see them running around in the building, I even saw one running around in the grills recently.

"We are forced to work in these inhumane, unhealthy, unhygienic conditions," said the employee.

Other concerns include water dripping in the holding cells and a leak in the police dock-et office, which creates a slipping hazard.

Even though the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) is responsible for the building, it said that the Department of Justice (DOJ) was responsible for the day-to-day management of the building.

DPWI spokesperson Thami Mchunu said there was a procedure to be followed for the maintenance of all properties the department is responsible for.

"In this case it is the Department of Justice that is responsible for the day-to-day running of the property. They are required to provide the DPWI with a legal document — known as the procurement instruction — instructing

the DPWI on the work that needs to be done. This document also contains the details and confirmation of budget availability. The DPWI then determines how the work needs to be carried out," said Mchunu.

He added that repairs were being conducted at the Pietermaritzburg Magistrate's Court.

He also explained that aircons at the court did not work as there was no water in the city centre, resulting in the cooling tower needing to be shutdown.

"There is a term contractor responsible for repairing of air conditioners at the magistrate's court. They are currently doing repairs on the admin block.

"There was no water in the CBD, as there was a burst pipe in town [last week]. The cooling tower had to be shut down because it uses a lot of water to run air-conditioning.

"On Wednesday a service provider was on site, starting to fill up the cooling tower feeding the pipes. Work is in progress, and we anticipate getting the plant running this week," he said.

Mchunu said the DPWI was also assisting to unblock toilets on request from the DOJ.

"An inspection has been carried out by DPWI, inspecting all cells. The workshop plumbers started the work to unblock the overflowing sewer line [last] Friday," said Mchunu.

Mchunu added that further work will be completed by the DPWI next month. However the responsibility of cleaning the carpets must be undertaken by DOJ.

"The leaking roof in the cells is caused by a leaking cooling tower pump. Waterproofing is required on the cooling tower and the client [DOJ] has been advised to log a call so that the procurement process can start. The carpets are the client's responsibility to clean. A call has been logged for fumigation work on rodents," said Mchunu.

Nhlanhla Khumalo of the Department of Labour said both the Occupational Health and Safety Act and Basic Conditions of Employment Act require employers to provide a safe working environment.

Khumalo said the magistrate's court would be added to its inspection list.

"As the department our role is to enforce compliance to employment laws. The Department of Employment and Labour does that by conducting inspections at various workplaces. The inspections are planned and actioned as per the plan.

"The magistrate's court will be included into the plan and the outcome of the inspection will be communicated with the magistrate's court management," said Khumalo.

Regarding the non-functioning toilets and irregular water supply, including leaking water in the holding cells, Khumalo said the act requires employees to ensure access to basic amenities such as water and sanitation.

"The Basic Conditions of Employment Act mandates that employers must maintain a safe working environment for their employees," said Khumalo.

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