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Standoff in parliament over costs for newly erected dome

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Parliament and the department of public works are in a standoff over the cost of installing fittings in the newly erected R30m dome meant to serve as the interim home of the national legislature for the next two years.

As a result, it's "highly unlikely" the installation of the dome will be completed in time for debate on the state of the nation address—and President Cyril Ramaphosa's reply to it—scheduled for February 11 and 12.

This is according to a memo sent to chief whips on January 17 by National Assembly speaker Thoko Didiza, in which she says she is disappointed by the department of public works' decision to renege on an agreement to carry the full costs of installing the dome—last used for Nelson Mandela's funeral in 2013.

The memo was tabled at a closed meeting of the chief whips' forum on Wednesday, which was held to discuss logistical arrangements for the Sona, set for Thursday.

Public works minister Dean Macpherson's department has

declined to pay for the cost of installing a backup generator, air-conditioning, carpets, furniture, toilets and flooring, among other things.

"I should at this point state that the extent of parliament's obligations, as indicated by the minister ... is different from what was presented and agreed to between parliament and the department at the point decisions were made on this matter," says Didiza in her memo.

"I find this development rather unfortunate, and I have indicated as much to the minister. Members are therefore advised that given the extensive work to be carried out in respect of the internal/tenant fittings of the dome, it is highly unlikely that the Sona debate and the president's reply to the debate will be held in the dome."

This will see parliament continuing to hire the Cape Town City Hall. The venue, including technical equipment, can cost up to R8m a day; the dome was intended to help eliminate such spending.

The department of public works started installing the dome in the first week of January, after it was shipped to

Cape Town from Pretoria in late November.

Didiza's spokesperson, Reggie Ngcobo, declined to comment on the matter, saying all enquiries about the dome should be directed to public works.

Lennox Mabaso, head of communications at public works, insisted that his department and parliament had agreed to share the costs of installing the dome.

"Before the start of the project, it was agreed with parliament that the costs related to transporting the dome from Pretoria to Cape Town, as well as its installation and construction, would be covered by the department ... The internal furnishing would be executed and funded by parliament. The department is adhering to this agreement," he said.

The chief whips' forum meeting also heard there were two MPs who were refusing to vacate their state-allocated houses at parliamentary villages in Cape Town, seven months after losing their seats in last year's general elections.

Mabaso said they were now facing legal eviction, but declined to name the defiant MPs.

"Yes, two former MPs have not yet vacated their allocated residences. The department has now instituted legal eviction proceedings to remove them from the properties."

Another presentation made at the chief whips' meeting by senior parliamentary officials showed that at least three former presidents have confirmed their attendance at this year's Sona along with other important guests.

The three are Thabo Mbeki, Kgalema Motlanthe and Jacob Zuma, who is also the leader of the MKP, the official opposition party in parliament.

Other confirmed VIPs include former national assembly speakers Thandi Modise and Baleka Mbete. Former speaker Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula—who is facing corruption charges—was invited but declined.

Former deputy presidents David Mabuza and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka have also turned down invitations to attend the 2025 Sona, where President Cyril Ramaphosa is expected to lay out the priorities of the government of national unity for the first time. —*Times-Live*