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Author: Staff Reporter



The KZN Legislature's Portfolio Committee on Transport conducted an oversight visit to the Zwelisha Bridge on the Klein Boesmans River on Tuesday last week.

The bridge, located along the D69 road near Estcourt, has been under construction for several years and has faced significant delays, causing frustration among local residents.

The project has been marred by challenges including budget constraints and contractor issues.

The bridge cost 29 million and was abandoned at 65% complete.

In 2021, heavy rains and flooding cut off the Zwelisha community, highlighting the urgent need for a reliable bridge. At that time, the contractor was reported to be on-site, but progress remained slow.

The oversight visit by the committee aimed to assess the current status of the bridge and address the prolonged delays.

KZN Transport MEC Siboniso Duma has previously expressed concern over contractors failing to meet deadlines, resulting in significant financial losses for the department.

The Zwelisha Bridge is one of several infrastructure projects under scrutiny, as the provincial government seeks to enhance service delivery and ensure the safety and connectivity of its communities.

Portfolio Committee chairperson Mr MC Maphisa told this newspaper that this bridge has taken a long time to complete; it should have been finished a long time ago because the contractor was given 15 months from 2020. Maphisa said their oversight visit was prompted by the many complaints from community members.

"What I saw is that there is no contractor on site, which means the work is not continuing. We have gotten the report that this work has been marred by different challenges, but what is important to us is that when our people need service delivery, that work should be finished in time so that they will be safe.

"When the river is full, people can't reach their homes and someone could lose their life," said Maphisa.

Regarding the way forward, Maphisa said that what they have to do is put some pressure on the Department of Transport

to quickly come up with a plan to finish the bridge so people are able to cross the river. Maphisa added that they need to put pressure on everyone who has been given a government job to finish it in time.

"In the department itself, there are people who are given the job of keeping an eye on projects. We will also emphasise to the department that there should be consequences for management, so that those people who are given the task of monitoring projects are not asleep on duty. Those contractors who get paid and never finish the job due to 'unnatural' reasons must be blacklisted," Maphisa added.

Ward 15 Councillor Sihle Ngwenya said they have been saying for some time that the contractor who was awarded this job is failing; his contract must be terminated and they need to get someone competent who will finish the work.

"We also pleaded with the department to come up with an alternative road for the community to use while construction of the bridge is underway so that whenever the river is full, our people will be able to cross," said Ngwenya.

Maphisa concluded by saying that no economy can grow if the roads are in a bad condition - if children cannot reach school, it means there is no future; and those who bring any kind of service to the community are prevented due to bad roads.

Cllr Musa Nkala, chairperson of Planning & Economic Development at Inkosi Langalibalele Local Municipality, said they acknowledged the visit by the Transport Portfolio Committee and were happy that parliament had responded to the cries of the Zwelisha community.

He added that they also recently raised the issue with Minister of Public Works & Infrastructure Mr Dean Macpherson to pay attention to this bridge.

Nkala said, "We also acknowledge our municipality for taking up the issue. However, the question remains: Why did they take so long to intervene? We want them to proceed and never stop."

The portfolio committee was accompanied by Inkosi Langalibalele Local Municipality Deputy Mayor S Dladla, Speaker SW Khumalo, Municipal Manager SB Mthembu and the community.