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Court refurbishments expected to commence in a year's time

Outcry to fix 'dilapidated' buildings sooner

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Though lawyers sometimes have to consult with clients in passages and infrastructure is crumbling, renovations at the East London magistrate's court won't be finished before 2029.

The elderly building on the corner of Fleet and Buffalo streets in the CBD was flagged last year, among 37 other court buildings in SA, as being in such a "dilapidated" state that they cannot support "efficient service delivery".

The refurbishments are not even due to start before April 2026.

This is according to answers by public works & infrastructure minister Dean Macpherson to questions posed by EFF MP Nolutshale Mbinga about the state of the court, located in Church Street.

Still, the news is a welcome relief, several sources in the East London legal fraternity told the Dispatch on Friday.

Macpherson said that a recommendation to appoint an architect was supported by the regional bid adjudication committee (RBAC) on October 22, and that planning was set to commence.

"The expected construction period is 36 months, starting in April 2026, with a completion date of April 2029," Macpherson added.

The Dispatch reported last year that the court was among 38 buildings described by the national public protector's office as "old and dilapidated".

After an inspection, public protector Kholeka Gcaleka found them to be in a state that could not support efficient service delivery.

The findings were contained in a report on her investigations into administrative deficiencies relating to the processing of gender-based violence (GBV) matters within the SA criminal justice system.

The investigation emanated from administrative challenges



MORE THAN A FACELIFT: East London magistrate's court has been flagged as one of the 38 court buildings that are 'old and dilapidated' by the public protector, advocate Kholeka Gcaleka — but the wheels of cleaning up access to justice are set to grind exceedingly slow. Picture: ALAN EASON

faced by the public, particularly women and children, when seeking justice.

Gcaleka's report detailed the state of courts across the country, highlighting structural defects such as leaking roofs, cracked walls, inadequate office equipment such as malfunctioning telephone lines, switchboard and air conditioners, persistent network problems, broken photocopiers, shared computers for officials and no functional integrated case management system (ICMS), leaving staff with little option but to document and capture case records manually.

The Dispatch reported inside sources at court who spoke to the Dispatch said they feared for their lives every day.

"That building is old and dirty," one said.

"Sometimes women share one toilet. Once, a fire broke out in the court machines.

"The court furniture is old. The heaters are not working. There's no hygiene at all. "One has to tread carefully when walking.

"Sometimes we have to go and photocopy papers outside the court ... It causes safety concerns," the source said.

This week the Dispatch team saw several people accused in the B court dock bumping their feet on loose flooring while leaving the dock.

Macpherson said the evaluation process of the appointment of the architect was delayed due to the introduction of a probit audit.

"The bid process was cancelled in June 2023 due to irregularities."

The bid was found to be invalid by a probit audit as the supply chain management had incorrectly calculated validity dates. "Tenders for the appointment of an architect were rein-

vited on November 10 2023 and closed on December 5 2023.

"Several delays were encountered during the evaluation and adjudication process of the prospective bids."

The planning instruction for the refurbishment of the court was received in January 2020 but appointments could not be effected as the project was not funded, Macpherson said.

The project was phased due to the urgency of repairs at the cell block. That project was completed in September 2023 at a cost of R5.5m, he said.

On Friday, Eastern Cape Legal Practice Council director Alfred Hona said: "The LPC welcomes interventions to ensure that court buildings are in good condition so as to ensure the safety of all who require justice through the courts, which should not be compromised."

"The LPC shall use the available platforms to engage with

the responsible people to have a solution to the matter as soon as possible in the interest of ensuring that access to justice through the courts in any part of the country is not compromised."

Robyn Berry, president of the East London & Mdantsane Attorneys Association, said the state of the building "over the years had deteriorated as virtually no maintenance has taken place."

"Security systems are non-operational and there have been incidents where weapons are being brought into the court building, leaving the public, attorneys, magistrates and court officials exposed."

"Toilets are often non-functional, no seats, unable to flush, water running, doors broken, leaving attorneys and the public vulnerable."

"Lights are often not working and broken, leaving some areas

of the building with dark passages, which poses a security risk.

"Air conditioners do not function properly and sometimes get stuck on their settings, heating up the courtroom and making it unbearable."

"Windows are broken with window panes missing, blinds are torn, which is evident from the road as you drive up to the building."

"Bird faeces, and dead rats are everywhere as courtyards are not cleaned or maintained."

"Lifts sometimes don't operate, leaving members of the public, attorneys and court officials stuck inside and people with disabilities unable to access different levels."

"No consultation rooms are available for attorneys so they have to consult with clients in passages."

"The infrastructure of the East London magistrate's court building is old, dilapidated and in dire need of attention."

"Refurbishment should have been prioritised years ago."

"The concern we have as attorneys is: what steps have been taken to ensure that access to justice is not compromised while refurbishment of the East London magistrate's court building is taking place?"

The SA Women's Lawyers Association' acting chair in the Eastern Cape, advocate Ncumisa Dyantyi said: "The building is old and needs urgent refurbishment."

"Inside the court rooms there are no security measures except the presence of court orderlies, who are unarmed because of the nature of their duties."

"The state of the toilets is appalling. An old lift constantly needs repairs, and the staircase to the one upper floor is so old and insecure that it's dangerous for anyone to use it."

"This contributes to the inaccessibility of the building to the public."

"All offices that deal with the public are inaccessible because of a lack of signage."

"The reconstruction should be done urgently."