**KZN Legislature Budget Debate: Budget cuts set to affect proper functioning of this critical oversight institution**

The Democratic Alliance (DA) notes the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Legislature budget of R644 million and remains concerned about the impact of current budget cuts on the proper functioning of the provincial parliament. As indicated by the committee Chairperson, the implication of these cuts is that the Legislature is unable to fund critical posts which support its core mandate. The DA sincerely hopes that ongoing engagements with Provincial Treasury, to assist with this funding will result in a positive outcome.

The committee Chairperson also raised serious issues around the current budget allocation mechanism. This must be resolved soon. The Provincial Executive sits around the table and decides on the future of the Legislature – the same institution responsible for overseeing its own work and performance.

Inkinga ukuthi ngelinye ilanga kophatha abantu abangafuni ukusebenza ngobuqotho, abangavele benze okulula nje ukuthi banciphise kakhulu isabelomali seSishayamthetho.

Laphoke utholukuthi amalunga esishayamthetho awasakwazi ukwenza amaOversight ngoba phela kuzothiwa imali ayikho.

Asishoke kodwa ukuthi sesifike kulelozinga ngoba sibonile isabelo zimali sehliswa kuwonke ama departments.

Ukuthi nje sibheke ukuthi wona ungadlaleka umakheqana nokuphaselana ibhola ngemuza.

Critically, during the Covid-19 pandemic the Speaker ensured that the business of the Legislature continued under difficult conditions. The Legislature Secretary and her staff must also be commended for their support of Members and to improving systems within the institution. The clean audit is not a surprise because this team works hard.

***Shocking state of Legislature offices***

While the committee Chairperson did highlight the issue of Members’ office space, this remains a particular concern to the DA. I can safely say that DA members only have offices on paper. None of them are in any condition to work in. Files cannot even be safely stored there due to a roof that leaks, while the damp and the resultant smell pose a health risk, particularly to staff who work there all day. Other issues include;

●     Damp on the walls

●     Leaking toilets with the ladies’ toilet leaking onto the IT server

●     Ongoing delays when it comes to painting by maintenance staff while the paint smell is also terrible and;

●     Three weeks of working on air conditioning which is still not completed.

Given the shocking conditions, the DA allowed support staff to work from home. When they returned though, they came back to the same conditions. Meanwhile, the Legislature pays vast sums to a Landlord who clearly has no interest in maintaining the building. It is a shocking waste of money to continuously rent this property.

The DA supports the request to consider a new approach of office sharing existing Legislature-owned buildings. We also note the Legislature’s proposal of re-looking at office space for the DA. The challenge is that we still have to wait for the “work from home policy” to be finalized. The DA cannot wait any longer for this and the Legislature must at least accommodate our support staff.

***Legislature oversights***

The DA commends the Speaker for taking proactive oversight measures after the 2021 July unrest and the recent floods. This is critical when our people are affected or confronted by huge challenges. However, there are inspections which leave Members with more questions and answers and which also deter them from attending future multi-party visits. And there are also oversights that are rubber stamp exercises or plain political campaigning which amounts to wasteful expenditure.

A recent example is the April floods oversight to the uThukela Districts. An earlier presentation indicated that the area had been affected by the floods, however when Members actually visited sites they were given different stories and when they visited houses it was clear that the damage had nothing to do with the current disaster. Before the visit to the Ladysmith Central Business District we were even told that there was water, when in fact there was none. Kwadlalwa ngathi eMnambithi. Hon Kunene waze wathi akuyona disaster kodwa poverty.

During deliberation on the amendments of the Rules, the DA raised concerns around Members being denied individual oversight by some departments. We were promised that the legal department would look at constituency policy and address this ongoing challenge.

***Slow pace of parliamentary replies***

The DA is concerned by the slow pace of replies to questions submitted to provincial executive members. Some executive members still need to be pushed before responding.

While it is unclear what mechanism the Speakers office uses to track replies, the DA believes that with the current technology and innovations, IT can develop an app or system that tracks all questions, gives members progress indicators on their replies and which also indicates when a particular reply has passed its deadline as per the Standing Rules of the KZN Legislature. The system could even automatically remind executive members when they have not yet responded to the questions.

More importantly, Members of the House could have access to such information, perhaps on a quarterly basis, in order to see which Members of the Executive reply on time and which do not. In this way, Members of the Provincial Executive can be held to account.

***ICT – moving towards a paperless Legislature***

During her 2021 Budget debate, the Speaker committed to upgrading ICT infrastructure and to ensuring that all Members have smart phones and laptops. This appears to have taken place and we now need to work towards a paperless Legislature.

The Legislature is the most vital institution when it comes to democratic governance, with oversight being its critical function. If this fails, the entire government collapses.