

Budget on Debate Vote 13: Public Works and Infrastructure

Speech by Madeleine Hicklin MP

DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure

House Chair

The vision of the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) is to be a trusted choice for innovative asset management, quality infrastructure delivery and sustained economic growth. Its mission is to provide strategic direction and quality services that offer innovative and proactive socio-economic infrastructure delivery, and maintenance of public assets while protecting the environment and the cultural and historic heritage of this country.

Lofty ideals. Beautiful words. Until you realise we live in South Africa where the ANC Government is in charge of this Department - **FOR NOW** - and such lofty ideals are impossible because of cadre deployment, rampant corruption, lacklustre and even MIA leadership - hallmarks of the DPWI.

So endemic is the level of distrust in the DPWI that the Government does not trust the DPWI with the reconstruction of its own rebuilding of the Parliamentary Precinct that was gutted by a **preventable fire** had the recommendations of the legendary BDO report not languished on the desk of the then Minister for 12 months.

The DPWI has the potential to be a powerhouse of job creation, large scale infrastructure projects and maintenance contracts. But aside from the obvious inability of this 'Another Night of Candles' government's challenge of keeping the lights on, the need to deploy cadres and employ only ANC members have rendered many of these SIPs mere vehicles through which to finance the ANC's 2024 election campaign.

The DPWI has a massive budget of almost R9-billion for the 2023/24 budget year.

One of my primary concerns lies in Programme 2's target on the Immovable Asset Register – the bane of every budget vote speech I have ever delivered – because it never seems to get completed or audited. Without an audited IAR, very little of the pipe dream can be accomplished as the DPWI cannot implement its own Government Immovable Asset Management Act and, therefore, cannot apportion land for the building of schools, police stations, hospitals or clinics.

It cannot appropriately lease buildings to client departments or repair buildings it owns before they fall into such a state of disrepair that they are of no further use to anyone.

And they also can prevent the destruction of heritage buildings like the Glass Houses that once proudly stood on the grounds of the Union Buildings. Home to the Veterinary Services of Gauteng and known as Vrede House, all that remains are a shell indicating where the building once stood and name board with a non-existent telephone number. And piles of

rubbish. In the Union Building gardens. A National Key Point. A Tourist Attraction. A crying shame.

In general, the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) is performing well. One of its greatest barriers to success, though, is the failure by the DPWI to provide a timeline by which the Public Works Bill, the CIDB and the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) Amendments will be tabled before Parliament. Another is the lack of will to address rogue contractors [read cadres] who are awarded tenders, disappear before the project is completed or whose work is unsatisfactorily done, and then disappear but get paid for their work. They then re-appear under another name – to get another tender.

But ordinary citizens are denied valuable job opportunities, essential construction projects, and EPWP workers lose their payments. A crying shame. A pitiful lack of caring.

The CBE appears to have addressed its vacancy deficits – how well, remains to be seen. The word transformation overwhelms every conversation. We wait to see it in practice. But while transformation is vital, upskilling and professionalisation is even more so – and this must be accomplished through appropriate policy and regulation promulgation.

Built Environment Professionals feel marginalised. They don't feel heard, they fear intimidation by leadership, and a system that they say has failed them. This needs to be guarded against – and representative policies created that acknowledge professional skills appropriately. Therefore, the research and knowledge management, and the policy departments have to be boosted exponentially if credibility is to be restored.

The shining light in the DPWI is Agrément SA, the certifier of innovative building techniques and products. They have just launched an Eco-labelling system that is a first in South Africa. They need to be congratulated on their continued work in creating fit-for-purpose IBT products and systems that are gaining traction **around the world** – but **sadly not** in South Africa.

We have a National Parliament to rebuild. It needs to be done speedily – it is 16 months after the fire took down our wonderful home – and ASA has wonderful green, eco-friendly, solutions on offer that should be considered. But the Minister, and the DPWI, do not even consider these products. What a crying shame. What a tragedy. What a slap in the face to Agrément SA.

In 2024, when the DA is in Government, these lofty ideals will become reality. Not pipe dreams. I thank you.