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## **THE RELOCATION OF THE MAKHANDA HIGH COURT TO BHISHO**

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Honourable Speaker, members and guests, good evening.

Let's be very clear from the onset.

What happens in this chamber over the next hour will have a direct impact on the lives and livelihoods of thousands of people.

What happens in this chamber today, will leave an indelible mark on the future of the people of Makhanda.

What happens in this chamber, will echo in eternity.

It is up to us to decide, whether the echoes in eternity will whisper a good story about what we did in a time when it matters the most, and whether the indelible mark will be one that we are proud of.

The proposal, to move the seat of the EC division of the High Court from Makhanda to Bhisho, carries significant consequences for the people of this province. It is a proposal that threatens the lives and livelihoods of thousands, potentially stands

to devastate the future of a community, and carries with it the power to decimate an entire economy, at a time that protecting jobs, in the province with the highest unemployment rate – matters the most.

In this country and province, we are no strangers to change. We understand that growth and development might require decisions that may be unpopular, but decisions which could ultimately promote opportunity, growth and lead to a brighter future. We also understand that sometimes difficult decisions must be made to ensure progress. However, the proposed move of the prestigious seat of the High Court in Makhanda to Bhisho does not equate to progress, to growth or to better access to justice. It is not just an inconvenient decision; it is a catastrophic proposal that threatens to devastate a core institution of our province.

There have been numerous voices speaking out against this move. People who have raised alarm from the private, business and community sector because they understand the devastating impact the relocation will have on the people of Makhanda.

For those who believe the impact of this move will only be felt in Makhanda, this belief is way off the mark. The impact of this move will ripple through the entire Eastern Cape because this is not just about a courthouse being moved, it is about the dismantling of an entire judicial ecosystem, an established economy and lives and livelihoods that have been built around it.

The decision is frankly a death sentence for the people of Makhanda which will decimate the economy of the town. Estimates show that more than 5,000 direct jobs will be lost and up to 25,000 indirect jobs. The institution which is the High Court Eco-System relies on the current location of the High Court to support themselves, to make ends meet and to provide opportunities for their children.

This is also happening at a time when the Eastern Cape is already caught in the grip of a recession. The people of this province are struggling. The Quarterly Labour Force Statistics for the third quarter, July to September 2024, showed that despite new job creation, compared to the previous quarter, the Eastern Cape was the only province to register a year-on-year decline with a loss of 7,000 jobs

compared to the same period in 2023. We do not need to create more poverty and unemployment; we need to create jobs and find solutions to lift our province out of the economic slump it finds itself in, now is the time to protect and fight tooth and nail for the jobs that we still have.

It therefore begs the question. Why even consider this? It is clear that this decision is not happening in a vacuum, however. We need to demand transparency and we have looked into exactly who stands to benefit from the massive infrastructure this proposed move will require. We have asked and answered the questions about why they are they so determined to see this relocation through? We have asked and answered the question as to who stands to profit? Why is the decision being pushed when the social and economic costs will be dire?

The involvement of certain private entities, provincial departments and officials, including the Slip Knot Property Group, who is being referred to the SIU by Minister of Public Works, Dean Macpherson, will continue to raise questions about the exact motivation behind the move.

And I know that those that stand to make millions from this ill-conceived proposal are listening, no doubt tuned in – well listen very carefully to what I am about to say – the walls are closing in on you, and your entire network, everybody the stands to benefit and benefitted in the past, no stone will be left unturned, no connection will be left uninvestigated! Hold on tight! Your house of cards is about to come tumbling down on you!

So, allow me to be frank– this is a decision that serves the interests of the few at the expense of the many. If the move goes ahead, it will simply destroy so much that is currently secure. 25 000 dependents are not a theoretical exercise. These are real people. Individuals who make up the fabric of our communities. It will affect schools, shops, families and entire neighborhoods. Once the ripple starts, there will be no way to contain it.

So, we need to put the facts on the table. The Eastern Cape is in a deep recession. Our unemployment rate is amongst the highest in the country. The expanded rate of unemployment for this quarter is a staggering 56.6%.

In moving the seat of the High Court of the Eastern Cape Province from Makanda to Bhisho, we as public servants must count the cost of this proposal.

I refer not only to the actual logistical costs of moving the seat of the High Court, or the cost to the legal industry and the residents of Makanda, as I have already mentioned, but the tangible cost to the public of our province.

We must consider the increase in legal costs that will necessarily be borne by those persons who will need to access, in particular, the seat of the High Court? Moving this court away from established legal service providers, from supporting industries and institutions will necessitate added time for travel and provision for accommodation, not only for the clients, witnesses, and experts, but for the legal practitioners themselves.

The ineluctable result is the substantial increase in legal costs across the board. A cost that will have to be shouldered by every person across this province who must have their cases heard at the EC division of the High Court. Middle income and lower income individuals will have access to justice moved even further from their grasp when it is our duty to enact policies and provisions which rather promote access to justice.

We simply cannot put our people through any more suffering.

The governing party in this province now needs to take a stand. It is no longer acceptable to remain silent on this matter. The people of the Eastern Cape need to know what is going to happen. The people of Makhanda, Bhisho and every resident in between deserve clarity. The people need to know. Does this government support this move? Is this the direction this government wants to take us as a province? Is this government willing to sacrifice thousands of jobs on a decision that is lucrative for some and harmful for the many?

Let us be clear in this chamber today. The people of this province are watching. They are listening. And they want to know where you stand. History will judge us for the decisions we make today. So – will we be remembered as the leaders who

stood up for our people and preserved livelihoods or will this administration be remembered as the leaders who remained silent while livelihoods were being decimated?

The time to act is now. The time to speak is now. The DA stands with the people of Makhanda and with the people of our province. Let us protect them, their jobs and their community.

Let us be on the right side when history comes to judge us.