

NCOP praises progress on new international airport

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PROGRESS at the R8 billion Dube TradePort and new international airport at La Mercy north of Durban came under the scrutiny of a delegation of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) as part of a week-long fact-finding mission in KwaZulu-Natal last week.

The delegation, which included NCOP deputy chairman Thandi Memela, inspected the sprawling construction site and quizzed Dube TradePort officials on progress and issues related to the mammoth project, and were amazed by what they saw.

"What has been achieved here within such a short space and under tight deadlines is very impressive," said Memela.

"The new trade port and international airport is a major development, in fact it's the biggest infrastructure project in KwaZulu-Natal and the second biggest in the country after the Gautrain."

She said the NCOP fact-finding mission was in the province as part of government's service delivery review process and similar delegations were visiting all nine provinces.

"In KwaZulu-Natal, we came to this new airport site because billions of rands are being invested here and we want to see first hand what's happening on the ground.

We also wanted to confirm that the benefits of this investment were not only being felt in the local economy but were contributing to job creation, skills development and broad-based black economic empowerment, among other things," she added.

"One of our concerns as government is what is going to happen to the people employed in the construction of this state-of-the-art new facility when the project is complete. Especially within the context of the economic downturn and job losses, we have to help ensure that some of the newly skilled people working on this project are not lost from the workforce. Their skills needs to be ploughed back into future projects of not just government but the private sector too," said Memela.

"We are also keeping an eye on questions related to this project, like how relocations of some people as a result of the new airport are being handled," she said.

Alf Lees, a member of the NCOP delegation, said he was stunned by the progress and the sheer scale of the new airport and trade port.

"This project represents a fantastic opportunity for boosting economic growth and development of not just KwaZulu-Natal but the South African economy as a whole. When this is complete it will be up to the

private sector to look at taking advantage of the business and trade windows of opportunity that will be opened. I think we all are underestimating the economic catalyst that this new facility is going to create for us," said Lees.

"Exemplary work has been done on this project and we have to give credit to both Dube TradePort and the Airports Company of South, as well as the consortium building the airport for what has been achieved," said Memela.

"However, there is a lot more work to be done. We have to not just ensure the targeted opening of the facility in May next year, but develop it to its full potential as a trade port and to get more international airlines with direct routes into Durban. This is where the real benefits of this project in bolstering the economy will be," she said.

Memela said it was great to hear that Emirates Airlines would be flying direct to Durban International Airport from Dubai from October 1 this year, before the new airport opening next year. She said it was a positive move that would bolster the case for more international airlines to look at potential direct routes to Durban.

Owen Mungwe of Dube TradePort, who made a presentation on the project to the NCOP delegation, said that they were pleasantly surprised by the progress and achievements of the development, especially on the BEE front.

"We showed that that we are on track and in some instances beating key delivery components of the project. One of the clearest examples of this is with regards to our BEE targets," he said.