

## Long shot: Hawks probe fraud allegations at shooting range

The Umzimvubu Local Municipality has already spent millions of rands on the project, but the site remains deserted and incomplete

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Construction of the shooting range in KwaBhaca by the Umzimvubu Local Municipality started about seven years ago. The municipality has already paid millions for the project but it remains incomplete. Now the Hawks are investigating allegations of fraud. Photo: Nombulelo Damba-Hendrik

The Hawks in the Eastern Cape are investigating allegations of fraud and corruption against Umzimvubu Local Municipality for an unfinished R9-million project.

Construction of the shooting range in KwaBhaca started about seven years ago. The shooting range was supposed to generate revenue for the town. Currently, the nearest range is far away.

But the project has been marred by unexplained delays and mushrooming costs.

The site has a 2km gravel road. Some excavation work can be seen. A half-completed slab foundation and a short wall are visible. We did not see any workers on site. There was very little to show for how millions of rands have been spent.

According to PR councillor Mandla Hlanekela (UDM), the initial budget for the project, led by the Local Economic Development (LED) Department, was R4-million and was to be completed in two phases.

Hlanekela said in the 2023/24 financial year council was asked to approve an additional R4-million to complete the project, which it did. “The explanation we received was that the contractor does not have machinery, so they are hiring it and that costs them a lot,” said Hlanekela.

He said earlier this year a further R1-million was requested for the project. “When we enquired how much had already been spent, we were told it was R5-million. Council then instructed the municipality to first exhaust the existing budget,” said Hlanekela.

This week, Eastern Cape Hawks spokesperson Ndimphiwe Mhlakuvana confirmed to GroundUp that investigators have been assigned to look into allegations of fraud and corruption on the project. “The investigation is at a middle stage,” said Mhlakuvana.

Lindokuhle Mhluzi, who lives near the shooting range site, said he has not seen any construction this year. “We were told it would be finished within a year. As you can see, it is still not finished,” said Mhluzi.

“I’m not in construction, but there’s no way what we see here will cost R9-million. Even R1-million is too much. The only thing here is a gravel road. When it rains, cars cannot use it because it becomes muddy,” he said.

In response to our questions about the project, Umzimvubu Local Municipality spokesperson Khoboso Lebenya said the matter was under investigation and claimed the municipality could not provide further information at this stage.

“As soon as the matter has been concluded, the municipality will provide details,” she said.