Taxpayers face big SABC bill

The SABC's 24-hour news channel is expected to cost R180-million in its first year of operation - and the Treasury is expected to have to continue coughing up to keep it afloat.

In a written reply to a parliamentary question from COPE MP Juli Killian, Communications Minister Dina Pule said the channel's projected operating cost for the first year was R180-million. This was expected to increase to R240million in the fifth year, she said.

It has also been estimated that the channel will need a further R75 million for its capital expenditure programme.

"At this stage the SABC is able to partly fund the launch of the 24-hour news channel but it will not be in a position to carry the channel without support from the Treasury," said Pule.

"It is on this basis that the SABC has applied for funds from the Treasury."

She did not reveal how much taxpayer money the Treasury would have to fork out.

Pule said the channel, the launch of which was postponed last month, would go on air as soon as Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan gave the SABC board his approval.

"Confirmation of the request for approval to launch this news service was received from the minister of finance on 17 August," she said.

Pule insisted that the launch would not have an adverse effect on the turnaround strategy of the cash-strapped SABC.

SABC spokesman Kaizer Kganyago said the public broadcaster had signed a deal with MultiChoice and that the news channel would be broadcast on DStv "soon".

He refused to divulge reasons for the delay of the September launch, saying only: "That was the intention at the time but there were things at the time that forced us to delay. It will be launched soon."

MultiChoice confirmed it would carry an SABC channel on DStv.

The news service will face stiff competition from rival free-to-air eNCA, which also broadcasts on MultiChoice DStv.

Kganyago said the public broadcaster's intention was not to take on the more-established eNCA.

"We are not creating this channel to compete with e.tv. We are doing it because it is necessary for the people of South Africa."

In contrast, independent broadcaster e.tv launched its news service a month ahead of schedule in 2008 and encountered no problems.

eNCA head Patrick Conroy said the costs involved in establishing his channel were confidential but the venture had been self-funded.

It seems finances might not be the SABC's only challenge.

In a report released last month, Media Monitoring Africa found that the SABC used between 15% and 28% of its broadcasting time on repeats.

Despite a commitment to language diversity, English dominated, used in 76% of programming.

The most-broadcast genre was soap operas.

The SABC has disputed the findings.

Earlier this year, it was reported that SABC CEO Lulama Mokhobo was confident that the corporation had enough capacity to supply fresh content to a 24-hour news channel. She was quoted as saying that at present only 20% of the news gathered was broadcast.

Source: *The Times* via I-NET Bridge

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