

Planning for job creation

by John Ebejer

ECONOMIC activity requires land and property and as such various economic sectors interact with the planning system on a continuous basis.

Promoting increased economic activity as a means of creating jobs is clearly a national priority to offset the impact of industrial restructuring.

The interaction between economic activity and the planning system requires analysis to allow for increased economic activity without unduly compromising the environment.

For this reason, the Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers will in the coming weeks organise a conference on "Planning for Job Creation".

When discussing the planning system, it is useful to distinguish between two elements. Firstly, policy documents provide a framework within which decisions on planning applications are taken.

The most important of these documents is the Structure Plan which is prepared by the Planning Authority (PA) and subsequently approved by Parliament.

Land-use policy documents should reflect government policy, not only on matters relating to land use, but also on other sectors. The Structure Plan is to be reviewed in the coming two years.

The second aspect of the planning system is the organisational structure which operates it. A number of boards (PA, Development Control Commission, Heritage Advisory Committee, Planning Consultative Committee, Users Committee and Planning Appeals) each have their own responsibility as defined by relevant legislation.

The PA employs professional and technical staff to enable it to fulfil its obligations. The way the organisation and the various boards operate impinges on the final outcome, i.e. the service provided to the client.

Of particular significance is the interpretation of the various policy documents by the boards and the organisation.

The contents page of the Structure Plan provides a useful list of sectors which to varying degrees effect job creation.

The chapters on Commerce and Industry and Tourism and Recreation are of particular significance while, Agriculture/Fisheries, Minerals and Transport are also relevant, albeit to a lesser degree.

Manufacturing industry has maintained its relevance to the national economy. Most industries are located in MDC-run industrial estates in Malta

and Gozo — some of the more sought-after estates are now full to capacity.

There is also a significant number of small industries with a few employees providing products and services to the local market (carpenters, mechanics, panel beaters and so on).

Inappropriate location of these industries in residential areas often give rise to complaints. The demand for sites for small industries away from residential areas has risen significantly.

Limited public land for small industries is available in Ricasoli and Hal Far industrial estates. There is also private land for industry in Mriehel but land available for sale and development is limited.

The shortage of private sector office accommodation prevailing until recently will be resolved over the coming years with a number of major developments particularly Portomaso and Manoel Island. Conversion of residential units to small offices remains commonplace normally in or close to a commercial centre.

Trends in retailing are also changing, with sizable supermarkets and shopping centres being developed in both Malta and Gozo.

Changing shopping behaviour has made it more difficult for smaller shops to remain viable although increased leisure shopping provides new opportunities.

Tourism provides a substantial inward flow of finance into the Maltese economy. Finding suitable sites for new hotels in committed urban areas may be difficult whereas new hotel construction outside urban areas will result in further loss of countryside.

The level of tourism activity depends on the entire tourist product including the visual aspect of towns and villages, the countryside and the coast.

In this respect, the planning system has a vital role to play to safeguard against insensitive development which could undermine the tourist product.

Moreover, development initiatives taken within the context of the Structure Plan and local plans could provide for a more attractive tourist product.

Leisure facilities are an integral part of the tourist product — a more varied choice provides for a more pleasurable stay in these islands.

This is generally recognised by the planning system and there have been a number of innovative developments in recent years.

There may be instances, however, where the environmental cost of a leisure-related development proposal is considered excessive and the proposal is rejected.

This is more likely to happen on coastal areas where issues concerning ecology and/or public access are predominant.

Historic buildings, village cores and archaeological sites provide an identity which distinguishes these islands from other Mediterranean resorts. There is scope for better use of these resources to improve the tourist product.

Preservation is not enough. Reuse compatible with the historic structure is required to breathe in new life. Many mistakes in the past have compromised our countryside and coast and undermined the visual attraction of these islands.

Abandoned fields are detrimental to the visual aspect of our countryside. Rubble walls are not properly maintained and heavy rainfalls wash away increasing amounts of soil.

Agricultural activity is useful, not only to create jobs and provide product for the local market, but also to maintain our countryside.

Innovative techniques in agriculture provide for increased production and helps create jobs. On the other hand greenhouses and the use of plastic on fields are becoming an increasingly common sight in the rural landscape.

Transport is relevant to business in a number of ways. Most businesses depend on good accessibility whereby clients can visit the business premises with the minimum fuss and expense.

Access depends on availability of parking, proximity to public transport routes, proximity to important foci of activity and traffic congestion on nearby roads.

By addressing possible access problems, the planning system provides for the long term viability of businesses.

On the other hand, at the development stage parking requirements impose an additional cost which could effect the financial viability of the project.

This analysis is by no means exhaustive. There may be other sectors whose potential for job creation is yet to be fully realised and to which the planning system may need to respond accordingly.

Medical care, care for the elderly, air/seaports-related uses are some

examples.

A regional analysis of issues relating to job creation is also required. The two areas which immediately come to mind are Cottonera and Gozo.

Increasing job opportunities, in Cottonera is widely considered as a means for regenerating an area which has suffered from continuous decline over the years. The Cottonera waterfront project is an important step in the regeneration process.

Being a small island dependent on another small island, Gozo is at the fringe of economic activity. The island's main asset in relation to job creation is its environment and the perception that it is greener and more attractive than Malta.

Large number of visitors generate economic activity on which many small businesses (catering, retail, small industries and food production) depend. Generating economic activity in Gozo reduces the island's dependence and therefore provides for a healthier national economy.

The current planning system has now been in place for six years and many lessons can be learnt from the experience — useful lessons both for the forthcoming Structure Plan review and the planned reforms to the PA.

On the one hand, the planning system needs to be more receptive to the

economic and social realities while giving due importance to environmental considerations. On the other hand, there is a need for better understanding of the planning system by politicians, the business community and the public at large.

The function of physical planning is not limited to the protection of the environment. Economic and social factors are important considerations and ultimately the planning system needs to strike a suitable balance.

Hence, the importance of the forthcoming conference — "Planning for Job Creation" — being organised by the Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers.

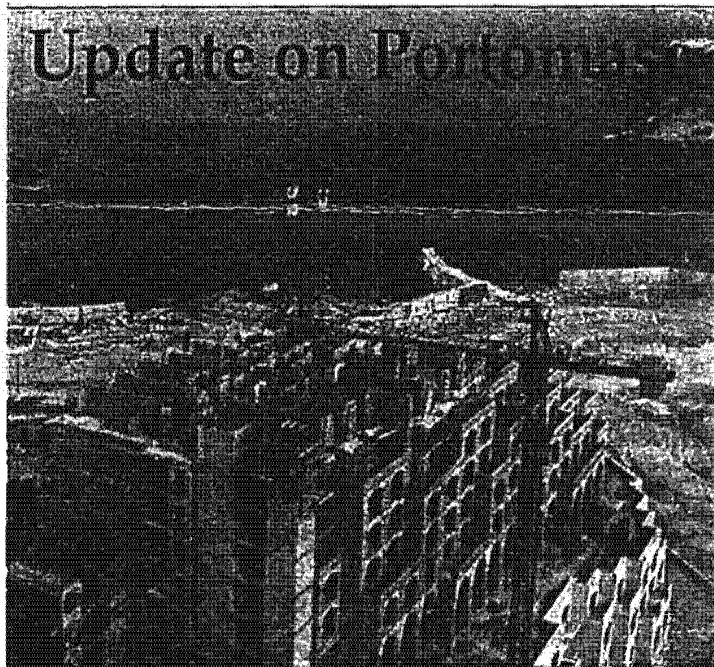
The conference will bring together private and public sector agencies with a role in job creation and/or the planning system.

It will provide a useful springboard for further discussion in the forthcoming months.

For conference information, contact Ms Doris Spiteri, Chamber Secretary, on telephone 378851.

The views expressed in this article are solely the author's.

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FOREGROUND depicts the south wing of the Hilton hotel with the north marina basin on the left, south basin on the right and the fairway to inner basin at lower right.

CONSTRUCTION within the Portomaso complex continues to gather pace and is on schedule with more than 50 per cent of the construction now completed.

Construction of the two bedroom wings of the hotel is now complete while the central core of the hotel is at an advanced stage. The first two of the residential blocks have reached the seventh floor level and half of these apartments are already sold. Work on adjacent blocks has already started.

The marina — 90 per cent of the excavation, the greater part of the quays and the sea walls are now completed. The Marina basins will be flooded in spring 1999 in preparation for the commissioning of the marina in June.

The 28-storey office tower has reached the 21st level.

There are currently over 600 workmen on site and this number will increase by the new year when more trades will continue with the finishing works in the various areas of development, said a spokesman for Cassar and Cooper Ltd., the Portomaso sales managers.