Pedestrianisation and parking in Sliema

A non-resident’s view

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Together with a resident parking zone, there needs to be the provision of off-street parking combined with improved public transport services.

In the mid-1990s, when I was an architecture student, I used to wonder how anybody could possibly accept the situation which prevailed in lower Tower Road and Bisazza Street, Sliema; narrow pavements crowded with hundreds of shoppers consistently engulfed in smoke from congested traffic. Today, 20 years later I still wonder how anybody could accept this situation in Sliema’s commercial centre.

The other day, the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads and the Malta Transport Authority (ADT) held a public consultation meeting on the proposed upgrading of the road network in the Tigne peninsula. The meeting consisted of a presentation on what is being proposed followed by comments from members of the public.

Apart from road upgrading, the government proposals include: (i) the diversion of traffic from the commercial centre to the peripheral road of the Tigne peninsula; (ii) the semi-pedestrianisation of lower Tower Road and Bisazza Street and (iii) the introduction of a resident parking zone (RPZ) eventually for all of Sliema.

From the comments made during the meeting, it appeared that most people were in agreement with the pedestrianisation, even if there was some discussion on the details as presented by ADT. There was, however, resistance from some Qui-Si-Sana seafront residents against the diversion of traffic to the peripheral road and, hence, also against the pedestrianisation of the commercial centre. They claim that the passage of traffic along the Qui-Si-Sana seafront will be detrimental to their health.

I would argue that the current situation is far more detrimental to health with hundreds, even thousands, of shoppers, shop employees, office workers and residents being directly exposed to vehicle exhaust on a daily basis. This exposure to pollution takes place in confined spaces where the exhaust cannot be easily dissipated. The situation along the peripheral Tigne road would be less problematic in terms of exposure to pollution because the road is open to the sea on one side, allowing for the rapid dissipation of pollution by the wind.

The creation of a pedestrian-friendly environment in lower Tower Road and Bisazza Street will benefit many Sliema people and others who regularly shop or visit the commercial centre. It will also relieve residents of the area from significant air pollution.

Pedestrianisation is long overdue. I do not live in Sliema but I know of several residents who tell me of the exceptionally difficult situation they face when it comes to parking their vehicle. As such, most people, residents and non-residents, would agree with the introduction of a resident parking zone for Sliema. In an RPZ, a substantial proportion of on-street parking will be reserved for unlimited free parking for residents and for short-term parking for visitors. The ADT’s proposal is for a two-hour limit for visitors’ parking.

A resident parking zone cannot be introduced without due consideration to the plight of non-residents. Moreover, the issue needs to be considered for Sliema in its totality. There are innumerable catering establishments, shops and offices along the entire Sliema waterfront, and the promenade itself is a magnet for thousands of visitors. Once the resident parking zone is introduced, non-residents who wish to visit Sliema for more than two hours will have serious difficulties to find parking.

What are non-residents supposed to do if they wish to visit friends and relatives in Sliema or if they want to go to a restaurant or cafeteria and then for a long walk along the promenade?

It was revealed in the ADT’s presentation that the demand for parking in the Tigne peninsula exceeds the supply of parking spaces at peak hours. This situation is probably common to all of Sliema. If this is the situation now without an RPZ, how much more difficult will the situation be for non-residents once an RPZ is introduced?

Car parks are required to absorb the demand for parking for visitors who wish to spend more than two hours in Sliema. My guess is that without such provision, in the long term, there will be pressure for the RPZ to be amended so that the needs of non-residents would be adequately catered for. This could undermine the operation of the RPZ to the detriment of residents.

There is an obvious long-term need for off-street parking in Sliema. The Qui-Si-Sana site is well-suited for an underground car park. It would be very short-sighted if this development is not actively pursued. The provision of parking at one or two other appropriate sites in Sliema should also be considered and pursued.

Public transport is also very relevant. With increased developments in Sliema, the need for an efficient and reliable public transport service to Sliema gains in importance. A good transport service maintains accessibility and reduces traffic congestion on the roads leading to the town. One could also consider a form of park and ride with a shuttle service from the Qui-Si-Sana car park to the commercial centre and then up Tower Road to Balluta.

A holistic approach is required to address the transport needs of residents, the business community and the workers, while improving the environmental quality of the Sliema commercial centre. Together with a resident parking zone, there needs to be the provision of off-street parking combined with improved public transport services.

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