

Improving the planning system

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Institution building is a difficult task. It requires a proper understanding of the issues, a sense of direction and above all perseverance. The current set-up and operations of the Malta and Environment Planning Authority is the net result of continuous change and improvement over more than 10 years.

These past few years saw some further improvements to the planning system. Amendments to planning legislation has streamlined the system while providing for more effective enforcement against illegal development. With the introduction of the design guidance DC2000, the parameters within which development applications are now being assessed are more in line with modern requirements. Information about development applications and policy documents is now more readily available on the Mepa website.

Up to some years ago there was one development control commission to handle applications for development. There are now three DCC boards. A larger number of applications can be processed, thus increasing throughput, reducing backlog and, for most applications, reducing processing time. More importantly, each board can focus more on quality. Applicants are being given greater opportunity to bring their applications in line with policy and, where necessary, to improve design.

In spite of the improvements, there are some aspects of Mepa's work which requires attention. There needs to be better communication between the case officer and the architect. In some instances the case officer forwards an application to the board with a recommended refusal without discussing with the architect any shortcomings the project proposal may have. Such situations should be avoided.

In some areas, more detailed policies and policy maps are required to reduce subjectivity in the interpretation of policy.

The relevance of local plans is not limited to providing guidelines for the assessment of applications for development. They also include a num-

ber of initiatives aimed at improving the urban and rural environment. There needs to be greater commitment by Mepa and/or the relevant agency responsible to implement local plan proposals, once such proposals have been agreed to. In a recent seminar, Parliamentary Secretary George Pullicino spoke of the government's intention of setting up an implementation unit within Mepa. Presumably this unit would work with other agencies to bring about further improvements to our rural and urban environment.

In recent years there has been a noticeable improvement in the design of buildings but there is room for further improvement. Case officers without any design training have difficulties in providing meaningful feedback on architectural design. There should be more involvement of architect-planners in the processing of development applications so that design issues are properly considered.

Another drawback of the current system that needs to be addressed is the significant amount of time that the applicant's architect has to allocate to writing replies to reports, reconsiderations, appeals, letters of objection and so on. This reduces the time and effort the architect can dedicate to project design. In some instances, this compromises quality.

There needs to be a concerted effort by the planning directorate, the DCC boards, architects and developers to have better buildings that are well designed and which provide a tangible visual improvement to their immediate surroundings.

Planning and development are sensitive issues which may well become the subject of political controversy during election time. Beware of candidates who make promises relating to development applications. From what I heard of the 1996 and 1998 elections such promises are quickly forgotten once the election is over. Beware also of anyone promising a radical overhaul of the planning system – the chances are that they would simply dismantle the current system without putting something workable in place. Experience has shown that incremental changes is the best approach to provide for an improved planning system.