

OPINION & LETTERS

Using the law to chop down trees



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The indecorous felling of mature (reputed to be at least 100 years old) holm oak trees at Lija (although the Lija mayor would contend that the site falls within the confines of Iklin) has understandably raised a groundswell of objections. The magnitude of the groundswell per se is encouraging, since it indicates that many are those on these islands who cherish what mature trees represent.

The tragedy for the holm oak trees in question is that they were in the wrong place (not enclosed within an Outside Development Zone or Urban Conservation Area) at the wrong time (in an era when traffic tailbacks and road rage are gaining the upper hand).

As a result of such a sorry predicament, the trees in question were doomed, without any legal straw to clutch on to, since, according to the law, they could be felled without any consequence, bar for the country at large, which has lost some majestic trees in the process. The mind boggles how some online commentators were completely dismissive to the angst being expressed at the tree felling, showing their utter contempt towards the histrionics over "just a bunch of trees".

Besides this category of Philistines, one then finds the turncoat cynics, who normally pose as tree-loving individuals but who then surprisingly opted to defend the road-widening works, either because of their involvement in the car industry or due to their defeatist attitude and sense of resignation. They said: "As long as it is legal, then it's no skin off my nose".

Then there are the sceptics, who downplayed suggestions that the trees could have been transplanted. The painstaking transplantation of mature oak trees has been done before. One such feat in the suburbs of Barcelona is described at http://eldigital.barcelona.cat/en/the-work-of-moving-a-centennial-holm-oak-to-c-ulldecona-has-finally-finished_494012.html, but probably our roadside contractors are too pressed for time to even explore such a possibility.

Against this background, we then embark on education campaigns to encourage our children to plant acorns in January so as to replenish our holm oak tree sampling nurseries. With hindsight, such a campaign might actually represent a perfect example of

serendipity, since the future of trees in Malta might well be represented by pot-bound trees that are never planted in open ground (lest they interfere with some major road project in future).

Planting young trees at an alternative location is not adequate compensation given our poor track record in watering saplings and the sheer length of time it takes before such saplings attain the venerable age of the felled trees.

The holm oak trees in question may have survived two World Wars but they could not stand their ground against the warped mentality of our transport authorities and roadside contractors who are eager to appease demands from motorists clamouring for a more spacious road network (which is just a short-term, stop-gap solution to our burgeoning traffic problem).

If we are to judge Malta from the way it treats its trees, then the overall assessment for the island is not a rosy one, which is ironic, to use an understatement, for a place with so few trees.

Why get so hot under the collar that vandals recently butchered trees at a sanctuary in Mellieha when this is happening all the time in urban areas, with the law's and authorities' blessing?

Five petrol stations within 1.5km, so far...

Earlier this week, the Planning Authority board approved the umpteenth petrol station for the islands, this time within the former hamlet of Burmarrad (PA 1514/16). More of the same readers might contend, given that since its formulation in 2015 the Fuel Service Stations Policy has ushered in an onslaught of such applications.

What raises eyebrows this time round is the sheer density of such fuel stations that this approval will bring about, with no less than five fuel stations being cluttered together within a stretch of road extending for



It takes almost six months for these holm oak acorns to germinate into saplings and another three years to reach the height of a five-year-old child. But it takes just a couple of hours to fell a 100-year-old holm oak, with the blessing of the law and the authorities.

just one-and-a-half kilometres, from the core of Burmarrad to the upper reaches of St Paul's Bay. What is perhaps even more jaw-dropping is the fact that Burmarrad is in for even more interesting times, with two other fuel station proposals still in abeyance, one of which literally rubs shoulders with the approved one, while the other one sits at the other end of Burmarrad. Run out of petrol, no; run out of open spaces, yes!

The local shortage of fuel stations was cited to recommend the approval of the Burmarrad application. While I do not observe any prohibitive car tailbacks at any local petrol station, I find this argument downright misleading, given that fuel station applications come along with a lot of baggage and strings attached.

In fact, the submitted planning application envisages the development of the following amenities, as if they were indispensable when filling cars with fuel: a car wash and drying facilities, an ATM facility, a tyre repair and replacement service, retail facilities (selling vehicle parts), restrooms and



Is this what the future has in store for trees in Malta? A pot-bound existence within gardens and nurseries, away from open soil?

a visitor car park, all adding up to a whopping 2,900 square metres of ODZ land.

Hence one can easily speculate that the refuelling and "need to relocate fuel stations away from residential areas" is just a façade to sneak in other proposed developments that further increase the construction footprint.

It might sound like tunes from an old and tired drum but the Environment and Resources Authority, along with NGOs Din l-Art Helwa and the Light Pollution Awareness Group, and the St Paul's Bay local council, had objected to the application.

According to ERA, even after all mitigation measures have been taken the following impacts are still likely to remain: (i) Impacts on geo-environment, in terms of excavation waste, with no suitable use given its relative very low compressive strength; (ii) Stability of the walls whose mitigation measures

effectiveness remain uncertain; (iii) Risks of spillages and leakages from the proposed petrol station, even if the probability is considered remote; and (iv) Impacts on visual amenity from short and moderate views. These legitimate arguments were dismissed by the case officer in his report recommending the approval of the permit on the basis that the application was consistent with the fuel stations policy.

As we have observed time and time again with applications for fireworks factories, ad hoc, special interest policies seem to be the trump card through which such types of development are being ushered in despite their incompatibility with site designations. Which special interest group will be catered for next by the Planning Authority's tailor-made policies?

Welcome to à la carte planning!

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