

## Environment

# We should learn to say NO to 6,814 developers



Alan Deidun

The numbers that environmental NGOs have long feared have finally come out. The Malta Environment and Planning Authority received a whopping 6,814 requests for the inclusion of additional plots of land in the soon-to-be-redrawn development boundaries.

Human nature is what it is, and in all probability the majority of these requests will centre their argument on a presumed injustice committed in 2006 when the last readjustment of the development boundaries took place. After all, this was the same argument made in 2006 by the PN government when it claimed the moral high ground by reversing the clock on injustices committed back in 1987 when the first development boundaries were drawn.

One soon realises the catch 22 nature of the game, whereby resolving perceived past 'injustices' perpetuates fresh ones, not least against the rest of the country and against future generations who have a right to live on the island with a modicum of free space.

Let us dissect this haunting figure of 6,814 requests. I have a hunch that most of these actually come from ordinary people who would not be branded as 'developers', as we normally use this term to describe people who regularly make a living through property construction and re-development, although some would argue that technically all applicants are developers.

This reveals the fallacy of the perception that well-known developers are the main culprits for Malta's overdevelopment. It's actually the regular Maltese man-in-the-street, who cherishes his one shot at striking rich by lobbying for permission to develop his ODZ plot of land.

So much for the impression that the Maltese increasingly care about the environment, as surveys frequently suggest. The once-in-a-life-

time opportunity to strike gold trumps over any fledgling green credentials we might aspire to.

The 'tweaking' (a oft-abused term in such circumstances, deployed to sweeten somewhat the pill) of our local plans has been on the cards for some time now, with the mandatory 10-year moratorium since the last 'scheme rationalisation' exercise in 2006 due to fizzle out imminently.

The government recently tried to reassure environmentalists that any new inclusions of land in the development boundaries will be compensated for through a *quid pro quo* - in other words, other currently developable swathes of land will regain their ODZ status, with the express objective of not reducing the total amount of ODZ land in these islands.

While at face value this sounds reasonable, it raises the spectre of causing new injustices, which will in turn create demand for a fresh wave of corrective justice to be offered to those seeking redress in

future. And so the vicious cycle will keep spinning on.

Electors should know where the Labour and Nationalist parties stand on the revision of the local plans, and this should be an electoral campaign issue. The government will probably try not to upset the environmental apple cart further before the next general election but this hot potato is sure to surface soon after the election.

Mepa should publish the details of the 6,814 requests in question, so that any allegations of patronage can be investigated. After all, preserving ODZ areas for posterity is not a private matter but one of national interest.

There also needs to be a clear and rigorous definition of what is meant by ODZ. Development boundaries should be drawn in a non-arbitrary way and using objective scientific and planning criteria that leave no room for redress, something that was not done in the haste of 1987.

Most importantly, politicians should avoid painting themselves into a corner prior to elections by encouraging voters' spurious delusions that their requests for individual plots outside development boundaries will suddenly be ushered in upon a change in administration. They should finally learn how to say NO.

### Californian hindsight

At the time of writing, the Maltese islands had received less than half of the average annual rainfall count they normally receive. This statistic is further compounded by the fact that the islands technically qualify as a desert this year since they have received less than 250mm of rain.

One would therefore expect the island's inhabitants to be scrambling, head over heels, to introduce water-conservation measures. But no actually, car washes work round-the-clock on weekends, with applications for even more car washes in the pipeline, and no regulation whatsoever - such as through the installation of meters - on the 5,000-odd registered boreholes on the island.

California, renowned for its green lawns, golf courses and fertile valleys, is bracing itself for its fourth consecutive year of drought, with below-par rainfall parching large swathes of the state.



When revising local plans and development boundaries, the mistakes made in 2006 should be avoided. Seen above are maisonettes developed in a former ODZ site in Attard.



Bone-dry Chadwick Lakes. This year's drought should make us realise we are living beyond our means when it comes to water consumption.

Some of the measures that have been implemented in response are audacious, to say the least, and frankly draw my envy. For instance, the slogan 'Brown is the new green' has been doing the rounds in California, in a battle to convince lawn owners not to water so regularly and that browning is more natural and acceptable.

Mandatory 'no-watering' days are imposed on residents during the week, with fines ranging from \$100 to \$1,000 (€90-€900) for offenders.

Predictably, sales of artificial lawns have skyrocketed and council authorities are distributing recycled water for water to residents.

Some residents are choosing to rip up their swimming pools (there is no water to fill them up anyway) and in areas such as the foothills of Sierra Nevada, they have to contend with mandatory daily water usage quotas that are up to 50 per cent less than they used to consume.

Even Chinook salmon fingerlings are being trucked 300 miles downstream to avoid shallow water depths and thus lower their risk of being eaten by predators.

But there is no risk of any of this happening here in Malta, however dire the island's water reserves, mainly because the government

resorts ever more on desalination, not realising that it is energy-intensive and susceptible to disasters at sea, such as a massive oil spill.

People in Malta should reappraise their views on freshwater consumption and adopt a more cautious and frugal approach.

### Presentation on Ta' Ċenċ development

Tomorrow, the proponents of the revamped Ta' Ċenċ proposals (which include 15 villas on the plateau overlooking Mgarr ix-Xini and an extension to the hotel right next to the border of a bird sanctuary) will deliver a presentation to Sannat local council.

One hopes that the council will not be impressed by the antics of the presenters (which will invariably include the worn-out pledges of further employment opportunities for Gozitans and changing Gozo's *pre-sepju* image). As it had done vis-à-vis previous proposals, hopefully the council will reflect the prevailing sentiment of Sannat residents by maintaining its objection to further development in the area.

alan.deidun@gmail.com  
www.alandeidun.eu