

OPINION & LETTERS

Dumping: bull taken by the horns



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The proposed revamp of the Environment Protection Act and of the Development Planning Act through the 'Action on Illegal Deposit of Material on Land and Illegal Reclamation of Land Regulations' is definitely a positive development, given the proliferation of impromptu mounds of rubble in the countryside. Such areas double up as makeshift landfills.

Through this legislation, the government is proposing that areas subjected to recent (post-1994) instances of dumping of construction waste (i.e. subjected to an 'executable' enforcement notice) be reinstated to their original state or be afforested, according to a method statement as approved by the ERA.

This proposal is commendable as it seeks to address the dumping bane in the countryside while at the same time freeing up more land for possible afforestation.

The current proposals must be ring-fenced so that they factor in further circumstances of dumping of inert waste on public land. For instance, what action will be taken when the contravener is a public authority itself say, Transport Malta, or contractors appointed by TM? There are cases, for instance, where mounds of rubble have been left unceremoniously by the roadside once a major road project has been completed.

I will further digress by dwelling on the dumping of inert waste on natural vegetation for bird trapping purposes, a

widespread 'phenomenon' to give the area a semblance of agricultural activity which would then make bird-trapping permissible. Would these areas qualify for rubble clearance action by government? Is the government still resolute on taking action even within privately-owned land, including the expropriation of the same land, if, for example, a private afforested site is not properly maintained or is being used for dumping, or will its actions just be limited to public land so as to allay fears that this is just a 'land snatching exercise'?

Have suitable disposal sites on land been identified for the hundreds of tons of inert waste which will inevitably be cleared, or will such waste end up invariably in the sea to fuel land reclamation, potentially opening another can of worms?

The upshot is that this is a bold piece of environmental legislation which represents a rare case of collaboration between the environment and planning sectors in this country. It should, however, be tweaked in such a way that it is improved and not rendered toothless.

Fuel stations galore

There is a rib-tickler doing the rounds on social media that you must be the most hapless of drivers to end up with an empty fuel tank on Maltese roads given the proliferation of fuel stations in every nook and cranny of the islands. The green light has been given for nine tumoli, or nearly one hectare, of ODZ land to be converted into three fuel stations in Burmarad, Magtab and Marsascala over the past six months.

Those defending the latest Magtab fuel station approval contend that it is compensated by the relocation of a kerbside fuel station in Mosta, overlooking the fact that the newly-approved fuel station includes 'amenities', such as retail facilities, workshops, car-wash, offices and whatnot which

were missing within the frugal Mosta station. The effective footprint has mushroomed to the maximum 3,000 square metres permissible by the policy.

The only way for the Planning Authority to defuse the current angst is to initiate a dialogue with environmental NGOs, ERA and the public on the complete overhaul of the Fuel Stations Policy which, by now, has served its purpose, to use an understatement, of furnishing the country with 'state-of-the-art' fuel stations in ODZ areas. The Partit Demokratiku (PD) has called on Parliament to revoke the policy, given that both PN and PL representatives on the PA board generally vote in favour of such applications.

Reprieve for pine trees?

At the launch of the proposed legislation on the mitigation of land reclamation, Transport Minister Ian Borg is reported to have

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said that he asked his architects for alternatives to the widening of the Mistra road stretch which would have entailed the uprooting of Aleppo pine trees of venerable age, besides the probable excavation of Quaternary deposits in the area.

If such an alternative materialises, then it would be a textbook example of how activism can bring change in this country and of adaptive management, where plans for any form of infrastructural project are not cast in stone but can be adapted depending on emerging evidence. Let's be innovative so as not to repeat the same mistakes as yesteryear.

Recycling time bomb

It transpired earlier this week that just under 7,000 tonnes of metal, plastic and paper were recycled by the country last year, equivalent, about five per cent of the total annual volume of waste generated for the same categories. This is a far cry from the ambitious recycling targets set by the European Commission within the Waste Framework Directive, through which at least 50 per cent of all household waste must be recycled by 2020.

Rather than collecting separated household waste once or twice a week from communities, recycling should be prescribed as mandatory, with the 'carrot and stick' approach being implemented through a financial incentive for every plastic bottle returned to retail establishments and fines imposed upon households not pitching in (even though there will be those who will invariably brand this as a 'tax').

The 'waste-to-energy' (a byword for incineration) facility in the pipeline will not assist us in attaining the 50 per cent recycling target, contrary to public perception, but will address the current shortage of landfilling space.