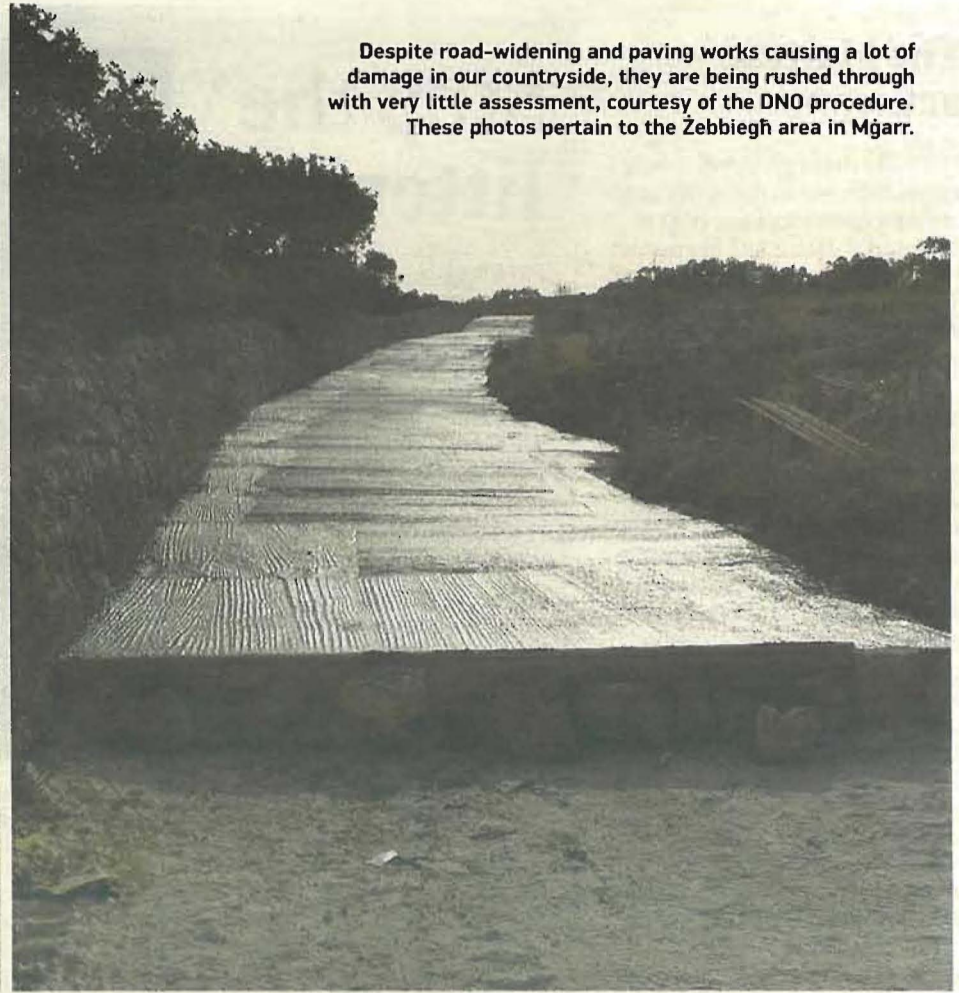


OPINION & LETTERS



Despite road-widening and paving works causing a lot of damage in our countryside, they are being rushed through with very little assessment, courtesy of the DNO procedure. These photos pertain to the Żebbiegħ area in Mġarr.

The battle's been lost

Has all hope of countering the advance of built-up areas been shattered?



ALAN DEIDUN

Mark Anthony Falzon's column last Sunday hits a raw nerve with all those working locally in the vineyard to oppose the unremitting onslaught on our last remaining natural and rural pockets.

A sense of resignation has pervaded the environmental community, which is probably borne out of 'objection fatigue' and out of the sheer dimensions of the development deluge. 'Tire them down' has always been the mantra adopted by the pro-development lobby in this country, and it is currently working to a tee since realistically, environmental NGOs and the public cannot simply react to every single objectionable planning application. Not even the Environment Resources Authority manages such a mammoth screening and reviewing task. And even if they would, their (including those of ERA) legitimate objections are regularly swept under the carpet.

For the incurable optimist, here's a qualifier for my pessimism. At the strategic level, while all eyes are set on the Planning Board, which still manages to wade through ODZ development for an area the size of one and a half football pitches in a single sitting (Burmarrad petrol station and Naxxar old people's home, approved last week), most objectionable development is being rubber-stamped through the three-member Planning Commission, where perfunctory sittings approved or sanctioned ODZ development at record levels during the pre-election months.

Representation of civil society on such a commission, which is almost exclusively

the preserve of architects, is and will remain a mirage.

Ad hoc policies (fuel stations, fireworks factories, rural policy and design guidelines, etc.), formulated to appease narrow interest groups, rule the day and even trump provisions laid down in local plans and even in the SPED, despite the latter document having been sold to us as a worthy successor to the comprehensive Structure Plan.

Even when planning applications do not adhere completely to the provisions of such policies, in terms of the footprint of ODZ take-up, for instance, or in the distance between adjacent fuel stations, the decision-making process is still skewed in their favour, as in the case of the Burmarrad fuel station.

This is not the relocation of an existing petrol station, it is entirely sited in an ODZ area outside the area of containment and has a total footprint (including

“

With a comfortable electoral margin and aeons away from the next election, now is definitely the right time for the Labour government to take drastic action in favour of the environment

that of landscaping) which exceeds 3,000 square metres stipulated within the relevant policy.

Dilapidated rural buildings, some of which were nothing more than a mound of rubble and which have last seen some form of human occupancy in the pre-War era, are being 'restored' (a misnomer for 'expanded') into plush residences, even within areas of natural or archaeological importance (among the most notable examples are permits granted for Bidnija right next to Punic remains and a Roman quarry), with the consequence that hectares of old-growth garigue are being levelled.

ODZ seems to be the preferred option not only for every Tom, Dick and Harry in this country, but also for large corporations which frankly should know better. In fact, after Lidl supermarkets, which have consistently targeted ODZ areas, McDonald's has earmarked an ODZ site for its relocation from the Malta International Airport grounds.

When it's not outright development applications, then it's either some large-scale, esoteric development which is completely incompatible with the inherently crowded nature of the islands, such as the race track, or road-widening exercises on a grand scale.

Apparently, the latter bypass the planning process through the DNO (Development Notification Order) shunt, similarly for applications for restoration of house facades, irrespective of whether such exercises are being conducted in urban areas or in rural or, worse still, in Natura 2000 sites. A case in point is the widening and paving of former countryside alleys in the Żebbiegħ/Mselliet area, which have unravelled the rural fabric in the area by doing away with a number of rubble walls and roadside carob trees.

The exact purpose of such an exercise is still unknown, since the widened paths just lead to the two private Mselliet schools, as is the exact footprint of wayside agricultural land being lost through all the road-widening exercises happening on a national scale.

The built-up/unbuilt area statistics for the islands certainly need revision. An even more insidious form of environmental impact is wrought by the unregulation of human activities in coastal zones, coupled with a complete lack of enforcement. Once the beach furniture is cleared, the tents move in, in a maddening rat race to the last square inch of vacant sand. If an attempt is made to clear the tents, the proprietors latch on to the fact that they are surrounded by illegal boathouses, which have been allowed to preserve by successive administrations.

This is the tragedy of the commons taken to new heights. Dwejra in Gozo epitomises our complete disregard for the natural assets of our coastal areas, with haphazard parking right along the cliff beneath the tower while all parking spaces in the square are taken up by coaches or by hawkers. Anyone for a park-and-ride down the hill from San Lawrenz? This while our beaches are heaving with plastic litter of all sorts as well as myriad cigarette butts. Anyone for plastic-free beaches?

The situation is so dire that it has prompted the Environment Commissioner to clamour for powers of veto for ERA. One way of reversing the clock is by overhauling completely the current knackered ODZ planning policies and to put some representation into decision-making boards and into enforcement, which were incidentally included in the proposals made by NGOs to political parties on the eve of the last election and which seem to have become simple clichés.

With a comfortable electoral margin and aeons away from the next election, now is definitely the right time for the Labour government to take drastic action in favour of the environment. It is within such a sobering and disquieting context that I have become extremely cynical about our prospects of countering the relentless advance of built-up areas within our remaining open spaces.