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Yet another threat to ODZ - Alan Deidun



Evocative rural settings, such as those at Bingemma, are being targeted for the development of parking lots, swimming pools, children's play areas and similar facilities, all in the name of 'agritourism'.

When the ominous Rural Policy and Design Guidance legislation was waved through in 2014, many were those who gave vent to a gnawing sense of dread, emphasising the menace that these laws posed to ODZ areas around the country.

In a comprehensive series of three articles, this column had joined the chorus by surgically dissecting the new policies, which effectively ushered in a myriad of new types of permitted ODZ development, including stables, boutique wineries, farmer residences, paved access roads to farms and even agritourism facilities.

For instance, with particular reference to the agritourism facilities, this is what this column had anticipated: "The new policy states that 'There is scope for diversification of farms by small-scale enterprises, such as small-scale farm retail, farm-based visitor attractions and agro-tourism accommodation.' Have any such studies been carried out to substantiate this?

"Do we actually know if there is a tangible demand for such services, before sacrificing more of our ODZs? Is such a rampant promotion of agro-tourism in the Maltese islands so viable when you have a prime, world-class agro-tourism destination (i.e. Sicily) on our doorstep?

"And what are the implications of such a policy direction on vehicular access and parking? It's not difficult to envisage how such farm retail outlets will result in a greater number of cars being parked in fields. Is this desirable?

"If such ventures fail, will the revised policy request the demolition of the permitted structures in ODZ areas and reinstatement of the areas to their former state within a stipulated timeframe, or will a future policy revision simply sanction their conversion into something else, thus enshrining their permanence?"

Development application PA04149/18, which is currently at screening stage, proposes the construction of Class 3A agritourism facilities comprising a total of seven rooms, in addition to a slew of ancillary facilities, including a catering area, stores, cesspit, a swimming pool, a kids' playing area and a car park, in an evocative rural part of Bingemma, l/o Mgarr.

If the Bingemma proposed agritourism development is stomach-churning, we simply have to brace ourselves for more of the same

In order to qualify for eligibility under the agritourism policy, farmers must demonstrate a minimum agricultural holding of 60 consolidated/contiguous tumoli. As noted by the Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) itself, the two applicants, both full-time farmers, do not comply with this provision.

On the eve of the approval of the new policies in 2014, Parliamentary Secretary Michael Falzon, who had been foisted with the responsibility for the Planning Authority, defended them tooth and nail, saying that the conditions attached to agritourism would not lead to the proliferation of new buildings in ODZ areas.

In its submissions regarding the Bingemma proposal as an external consultee, the Environment and Resources Authority was understandably apprehensive about the nature and scale of the proposed development. For instance, the ERA commented that it would result in the commitment of a large tract of approximately 3,400 square metres of undeveloped rural land, the proliferation of physical development in the countryside and significant site formalisation through the introduction of hard landscaping, paving, decking, beaten earth areas, formal landscaping, etc. The ERA also pointed to other environmental issues associated with the introduction of light and miscellaneous disturbance on site and in the surrounding area, which would contribute to the degradation of the wider site context.

Even more telling, the ERA contended in its submissions that "this and similar developments contribute to the degradation of the landscape and visual amenity of the area. Cumulatively, these would lead to the significant overall change in the appearance of the surroundings and wider context, which is rural in setting."

Such a damning evaluation is, frankly, diametrically opposed to the reassurances that Mr Falzon had given us way back in 2014.

If the Bingemma proposed agritourism development is stomach-churning, we simply have to brace ourselves for more of the same, given that, according to information tabled in Parliament in 2014, a total of 111 farmers own more than 60 tumoli of agricultural land in Malta (one-third of them based in Gozo), rendering them eligible to partake of the policy's favourable stance towards agritourism development.

If each potential, eligible farmer is allocated a maximum built-up footprint of 400 square metres (as per approved policies), then we are in for a veritable onslaught of our remaining agricultural land, ironically for supposedly agritourism development, as if the fuel stations bane is not enough.

One of the less palatable legacies of the revised ODZ policies introduced in 2014 is the sanctioned conversion of good-quality farmland into children's play areas, parking lots and swimming pools.

Agritourism my foot!

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