

Sunday, August 5, 2018, 00:01 by Alan Deidun

Island at risk of being stifled by fuel stations - Alan Deidun



Umpteenth application: the proposed area for an ODZ fuel station in Żejtun, with the Planning Authority hearing being deferred, allowing the applicant to buy more time in a desperate attempt to obtain approval.

The decision on planning application PA 2585/18, for the umpteenth proposed ODZ fuel station (complete with car and truck wash areas, a class 4b shop and other ancillary facilities including a class 5a shop), at Triq Ħal Tarxien in Żejtun, was deferred earlier this week upon the applicant's own request.

Many in the know have greeted the decision with a sense of foreboding and misgiving, branding the application as a tactical one in order to buy more time to reverse the currently unfavourable odds. In fact, the case officer, in his assessment of this application, categorically recommended refusal, on the following grounds:

The proposed fuel station runs counter to the provision of the Fuel Service Stations Policy, 2015, which requires that new fuel stations are set back appropriately from a distributor or arterial road and should have their entrance visible.

The proposal runs counter to the provisions of policy SMAG 01 of the South Malta Local Plan which seeks to protect Areas of Agricultural Importance from inappropriate development.

The proposed development runs counter to South Malta Local Plan Policy SMCO 07 stating that there will be a presumption against development that will adversely affect the function of the valley as an important water catchment area.

Speculation has it that the applicant will seek to undermine two of these justifications, namely, the designation of the access road to the proposed fuel station, which does not qualify as a distributor or arterial road, and the agricultural value of the area.

On the first score, the comprehensive list of all distributor and arterial roads as designated and recognised by Transport Malta is reported online at transport.gov.mt. Triq Ħal Tarxien in Bulebel (not in Gudja, where an eponymous road exists), which does not exceed a width of seven metres along some of its stretches, is not featured within such a list.

Secondly, residents can attest to the fact that until last winter, the earmarked plot of land was being used for the cultivation of potatoes, among other crops.

Yet another consideration militating against the approval of this fuel station is the proximity to a crucial telephony line exchange centre, which feeds the airport and is thus designated as a sensitive site of national importance.

It is deeply ironic and sobering at the same time that the site of this latest odious planning application is located just opposite the swathe of agricultural land which had been earmarked

by government earlier this year for an extension of the existing Bulebel industrial estate.

Such a massive incursion into agricultural land was warded off, mainly through the dogged intervention of the Wied iż-Żejtun environmental NGO, which drew the limelight on the multifarious environmental, agricultural and archaeological assets of the area.

Wied iż-Żejtun is, needless to say, also one of the nearly 200 objectors to the Żejtun fuel station proposal, rightly underscoring the fact that there are no less than six other fuel stations within an adjoining distance of 1.5km. This argument should override and prevail over any other consideration and has been championed by the Environment Resources Authority as well.

The ERA has stressed the fact that the EIA study for this single proposed fuel station does not address the need for a strategic assessment of the cumulative amount of agricultural and ODZ land being lost through the combined number of fuel station applications being submitted. One must bear in mind, in fact, that there are 12 other similar applications in the offing, which collectively constitute a footprint exceeding 50,000 square metres, equivalent to five full-size football pitches.

It would indeed be an insult if months of gritty campaigning by civil society to save the Wied iż-Żring environs, an agricultural remnant hemmed in between the urban conglomerates of Fgura, Tarxien and Żejtun, were rendered superfluous through the PA's approval of this obsolete fuel station proposal right opposite.

It would be perhaps even more anomalous, to use an understatement, if the PA fell for the applicant's shenanigans and desperate groping to seek approval, given the incontestable arguments made by the case officer against the development. It would be tragic if the Planning Authority gave its blessing to the desecration of this strategic buffer between the Bulebel industrial zone and residential areas, which will probably lead to a further watershed of development in the area in future.



Cleaner seas: hats off to the Żibel NGO for piloting the introduction of SeaBin technology in Maltese yacht marinas.

SeaBin technology

The hazard posed by litter to marine ecosystems and state of health cannot be overstated nor gainsaid, such that a groundswell has built up in favour of adopting concrete measures to address the challenge. The environmental NGO Żibel has been pivotal in the past few years in spearheading clean-up campaigns and in fostering greater awareness about the marine litter issue.

I got wind of the fact that the NGO would be pioneering the introduction of SeaBin technology in Maltese waters by launching an innovative device at a local yacht marina next week. While obviously being no panacea (chiefly because tackling marine litter requires a holistic approach,

9/13/2018

Island at risk of being stifled by fuel stations - Alan

not least a reduction of our dependence on single-use plastic), SeaBins have been hailed as a useful tool in assisting coastal managers to recover litter that ends up in the marine domain.

Within a SeaBin device, water is sucked in from the surface and passes through a catch bag inside the device, with a submersible water pump capable of displacing 25,000 LPH (litres per hour), plugged directly into a 110/220 V outlet. The water is then pumped back into the marina leaving litter and debris trapped in the catch bag to be disposed of properly.

Hence, hats off to the team at Žibel for such a great initiative!

alan.deidun@gmail.com