

Opening the floodgates?



Buildings spreading over the countryside at Victoria as seen from the Citadel. More Outside Development Zone land will probably be sacrificed to development through the revision of the local plans and selected ODZ policies, as if we have learnt nothing from the 2006 'scheme rationalisation'.

I have a terrible sense of foreboding about future developments (pun intended) in the review of existing Outside Development Zone (ODZ) policies and local plans, after having seen the first harbingers of what's to come emerging.

For instance, a raft of ODZ policies, relating to anything from farm buildings to stables, boutique wineries, buildings for olive oil production, agro-tourism developments, animal sanctuaries, swimming pools and fireworks factories, have been issued for public consultation by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority with a view to revising the policies.

During the two-week consultation period, which expired on September 16, just 112 submissions were made to Mepa on the revision of ODZ policy objectives. Of these, 70 per cent (79 representations) came from NGOs, including Din I-Art Helwa, the Malta Water Association, Ramblers, the Light Pollution Awareness Group and the Permaculture Research Foundation, as well as from Alternattiva Demokratika and Mepa's Environment Protection Directorate.

The remaining 41 representations, by individual applicants or by their architects, mostly called for the promotion of agri-tourism (through the sanctioning of some form of constructions, unobtrusive as they might be, presumably for the 'generation of economic activity'), while some even went as far as making preposterous suggestions.

The most poker-faced of these called for an ODZ disused livestock farm and horse paddock to be converted into a residence, while another called for the inclusion within development boundaries of an ODZ plot (within a Strategic Open Gap, to boot) in Mosta.

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A well-known wedding venue in Wardija went as far as requesting for the inclusion of adjacent parcels of land within their perimeter, as per revised policies.

But as they say, not all is rotten in the state of Denmark, with a number conscientious members of the public making judicious submissions, such as to stop issuing permits in ODZ areas and to reject further applications in ODZ areas to avoid the destruction of what remains of Malta's countryside.

Speaking of fireworks factories, the Għaqda tan-Nar San Bartilmew seems to have a knack for opportunism; no sooner had the revision of the ODZ policies on fireworks factories been announced that they submitted PA 02721/13 for the extension of their fireworks factory in Wied

id-Dis, adding another notch to the ever-increasing tally of fireworks factory planning applications being submitted to Mepa.

The word in the grapevine is that the planning authorities will be more tolerant vis-à-vis such factories from now on – it seems like the fireworks organisations are banking on this to materialise.

Last Monday saw the deadline for public submissions for the revision of the local plans. If 2006 is a good indicator, then we are in for much more agony.

Do we have no money for enforcement?

It is indeed disconcerting to note that the wings of Mepa's Enforcement Directorate have literally been clipped in recent years, as decried by the Auditor-General.

In fact, despite the backlog of thousands of pending executable enforcement notices, by March 2013 the directorate still had to recoup from perpetrators of infringements 84 per cent of the costs attached with the enforcement, with the total bill hovering around the half-a-million euro mark.

Even more sobering is the glaring lack of manpower and of a comprehensive IT infrastructure in the directorate. We talk a lot about the need to enforce planning law, but it seems we don't walk the talk.

Still rudderless

Six months down the line, ever since the resignation of the incumbent director Petra Bianchi, Mepa's Environment Directorate is still rudderless, with the authority's chairman doubling to fill the role.

With the much-touted separation of Mepa's planning and environment branches still a pipedream and with the designation of a new environment director presumably far off on the horizon, the staff of the directorate are currently in an unenviable predicament.

Besides perennially playing second fiddle to the much larger clout of the Planning Directorate, the staff have to operate without a director with whom to resonate their views where it counts. This is effectively silencing the directorate, in a very subtle way, leaving the Planning Directorate to run riot.

No prizes for guessing which staff are demotivated as a consequence.

Silver linings

Luckily, it's not all doom and gloom out there, with a couple of silver linings breaking the drudgery. For instance:

- An agreement was signed between Mepa and San Lawrenz local council, through which management of Malta's first ever marine environmental education centre, which opened last March in Dwejra, Gozo, was entrusted to the council.

This might seem as a trivial matter but, in reality, the agreement gives the local council a sense of ownership over the centre, which will hopefully shore up the beleaguered centre against the numerous challenges lapping up around it, not least those involving financial sustainability.

- In recent weeks, Din l-Art Ħelwa (DLH) launched three blogs concerning architectural and environmental policy and issues, penned by Petra Caruana Dingli, Conrad Thake and myself.

The blogs may be accessed at <http://dinlartelwa.org/category/blogs/>.

- Mepa, after being challenged by Malta Today and being given the cold shoulder by the Data Protection Commissioner, finally agreed to reverse its original decision not to publish the names of those making submissions during the public consultation exercise for the revision of the local plans. A victory for transparency indeed.
- The eNGO Nature Trust and the Malta Medical Students Association recently organised a massive clean-up at Ġnejna Bay, retrieving a staggering 400kg of all kinds of waste from the water, through snorkelling, from the beach and from the sand dunes.

Besides run-of-the-mill discarded plastic bottles, cups and plates, the waste also included a discarded boat trailer, oil drums and even discarded carpets.

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