

## Retire in Santa Luċija



There is no respite for ODZ areas, with an old peoples' home being proposed for this undeveloped area between Santa Luċija and Luqa.

Conflicts of interest is a recurring theme touched upon in this column. Robert Sarsero is a member of the Planning and Environment Review Tribunal to which applicants can appeal decisions taken by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. He is also the architect for an application proposing the construction of a four-storey old peoples' home at Wied Garnaw in Santa Luċija, spread over almost 4,500 square metres, right next to the Girls' Lyceum school.

This would have been a conflict of interest up till a few years ago, but under a revised policy, members of such tribunals and boards can now represent clients on planning applications.

This aside, the environmental community, and not just that of Santa Luċija, is up in arms over the submission of this plan which will eat into another swathe of Outside Development Zone land in Wied Garnaw. An online signature-collecting petition recently reached the 2,000 milestone. The South Malta Local Plan stipulates that "Mepa will support the protection of the open stretch of land shielding residences from the *Ħal Luqa* and *Bir-id-Deheb* arterial roads", although this policy might be scrapped as local plans are currently being revised.

Years ago, an application for a residential development in the same area was outrightly rejected. Years ago, some local councils near Santa Luċija, such as *Gudja*, were very active in

the Save Wied Garnaw campaign, and even attended protests organised on site. One hopes that the same acumen and the will prevails now too, despite the change in government.

## Robert Musumeci's untenable position

Have you ever heard of il-Ħotba tal-Ħżejjen? Probably not. I myself had never heard of it until a few days ago when I was alerted to an outrageous development proposal for the location. In fact, PA 03436/13 proposes the construction of a residence for a full-time farmer at il-Ħotba tal-Ħżejjen, limits of Bidnija, St Paul's Bay.

Lying beside a watercourse (Wied tal-Ħżejjen), this backwater has so far been devoid of any development, offering visitors idyllic views of the countryside. The only voice of dissent so far to this preposterous proposal has come from Mepa itself – from the Natural Heritage Panel to be precise – which rightly objects to the proposal on the grounds that “this pristine site is located within the buffer zone of a Level 2 AEI (Area of Ecological Interest) and on the side of a valley”. The architect of this planning application is Robert Musumeci, and that is the first tassel in the mosaic.



The archaic fishing laws regulating the use of trammel nets (part) in local waters should be revised to reduce the current pillaging of coastal water fish species, as shown in this photo taken at the mouth of St Thomas Bay a few days ago.

Musumeci is not new to such controversial applications and permits in ODZ areas that induce anguish in environmentalists. Less than a kilometre away, at Wardija, specifically at Ġebel Ġhawzara, Musumeci was the architect behind the approval for the ODZ residence high up on the promontory above Burmarrad, complete with exotic palms and all. The farmhouse, built just metres away from the Baħrija watercourse, is yet another prominent case of ODZ permit approval featuring this same architect. However, since these cases pre-date Musumeci's appointment as adviser to the Parliamentary Secretary for Planning, this did not give rise to any conflicts of interest.

*If the Environment Ministry does not defend the environment by speaking out against the proposed incursion in ODZ areas, who will?*

You might rightly argue that, at the end of the day, Musumeci is simply doing his job and that it is pointless targeting only him as countless other local architects submit ODZ planning applications on behalf of their clients. True, but the only hitch in this reasoning is that Musumeci is no ordinary architect – since last year he has been an adviser to the Parliamentary Secretary for Planning, and thus, presumably, has a bearing on the way future planning policy is being drafted. That's mosaic tassel number two.

Incidentally, one of the proposed ODZ policies states that full-time farmers having a minimum threshold of land holdings may be entitled to a residence on site, despite the area being ODZ. Thus, once these ODZ policy changes come into force, the applicant submitting PA 03436/13 for il-Ħotba tal-Ħżejjen will no longer face an uphill struggle to get it approved.

Prior to the proposed ODZ policy changes, this application was doomed and destined for rejection. Now it has been given a new lease of life as it will be judged on its merits as a new proposal, just like 51 other 'previously doomed' ODZ applications, three of which, coincidentally, also feature Musumeci as their architect.

At il-Ħotba tal-Ħżejjen, it's either a case of the architect's incredible luck or foresight. In his capacity as advisor to the Parliamentary Secretary for Planning, could it be that Musumeci could sense beforehand what was on the cards? Musumeci's current privileged status as judge and jury is not tenable nor healthy for a supposedly transparent and objective planning system.

## We need a strong Leo

Environment and Sustainable Development Minister Leo Brincat's recent complaint that his ministry was not consulted on the proposed Mepa demerger and on the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development, and on the avalanche of proposed planning policies, is an inane attempt at blame avoidance. Surely his ministry does not need to wait for the policies of the Parliamentary Secretariat responsible for Mepa to knock on the ministry's door in order to prompt it into action.

Incidentally, it seems to have escaped Brincat that he is a member of the same Cabinet as the said Parliamentary Secretary, so he should have privileged access to the latter without having to do the rounds, like us mortals, to be granted an audience. It's not even a case of the proposed Mepa changes not falling within the Environment Ministry's remit, since Brincat was, rightly so, very vocal and visible prior to March 2013, in his constant criticism of the authority.

So, one might ask, where has his fervour gone now? He claims his hands are full with disentangling the waste management mess but, here again, as Brincat will concede, the

environment is not only about waste management. If the Environment Ministry does not defend the environment by speaking out against the proposed incursion in ODZ areas, who will?

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