

Another Bugibba?



Tyre marks along Wied il-Luq in Buskett bear testimony to the scourge of certain offroaders.

No lessons seem to have been learnt from the unbridled urban sprawl along the Bugibba/Qawra seafront or from the ongoing usurpation of the once rural setting of Xemxija. All tenets of sustainable tourism seem to have fizzled out completely, especially at Għadira.

This bay was once hailed for its natural ambience and setting, as immortalised in the Maltese song *Il-Bajja tal-Mellieħa*. Holiday villages and complexes have recently flashed their teeth and threaten to convert the bay into just another Bugibba.

In fact, there is a pending Sea Bank hotel application for a massive extension to its facilities over disused farmland, which would be too close to the Għadira Bird sanctuary and would almost straddle with the existing Danish Village. Besides this, the Mellieħa Bay Hotel has also decided to join the fray by proposing an extension of 98 units to the existing premises (PA06329/07) pursuant presumably to develop a holiday complex on undeveloped land within the confines of the same hotel.

The same site is designated as an area of ecological importance/site of scientific importance and a buffer zone to protect the coastal cliffs.

It seems that the adage that 'old habits die hard' rings especially true for some individuals who persist in being involved in projects of dubious environmental sensitivity all over the island. The authorities should treat all applications on their own merits but if the Mellieħa Bay Hotel extension is granted, the entire I-Aħrax peninsula is prostrate at the feet of such ravenous developers.

Lidl hypocrisy

The words by David Gatt, Lidl's country manager for Malta, in reaction to the uproar created over the Safi supermarket, reek of crocodile tears. Mr Gatt states that "we are not happy that the development has been described as such", in reference to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority auditor who described the development as 'illegal'.

I fail to give credence to Mr Gatt's statements since Lidl plans to open seven supermarkets in Malta, two of which are on outside development zone sites in Żabbar and Żebbuġ. Mr Gatt will probably reiterate what he has already told the media - that Lidl's enter into ownership of supermarkets once permits are in hand. However, it seems very convenient to shirk any direct responsibility for eventual ODZ developments when in reality you are the catalyst and motivation behind such applications.

If Mr Gatt is not happy with the ruckus at Safi, can he imagine what the reception will be if either of the Żabbar or Żebbuġ supermarkets are allowed?

Will he be surprised at the probable negative reception, knowing that both sites are ODZ?

If Lidl wants to be taken seriously when it claims that it does not breach the law, it should urge its commissioned developer to ditch its pending ODZ supermarket applications. I consider such

a strategy to be a more incisive than mailing glamorous marketing flyers to households.

Still somewhat cosmetic

It is indeed refreshing news that the draft code of ethics for Mepa members of staff submitted for public consultation is very similar to the one made by auditor Joe Falzon. Despite this, the newly-fledged code of ethics still has a number of lacunae.

For example, while broad guidelines are given on the matter, the code of ethics does not preclude meetings between Mepa staff and political exponents.

Also, while precluding meetings between individual board members and developers, the draft code still contemplates meetings between the Mepa chairman and the same developers.

There is an arbitrary and ambiguous definition of what constitutes 'frequent lunch invitations'. Where will the proverbial red line be drawn as to the frequency of such invitations? Will invitations received by individuals be screened and monitored?

One of the authority's main issues, which the draft code seeks to address, is the much-mooted conflict of interest of some board members. The code stipulates that appropriate action can be taken by Mepa if the board is faced by frequent conflicts of interest which hamper its function. Can someone elaborate on the meaning of 'appropriate action'?

The draft code is replete with good propositions - however, it risks being no more than a paper tiger if shorn of the appropriate enforcing provisions.

Unwarranted attack

A certain Pierre Mizzi recently posted a comment on the timesofmalta.com webpage, in relation to the proposed Mistra high-rise development, taking a swipe at environmental NGOs.

Quoting from his contribution: "I think these NGOs are going too far!! Not all developments are just bad! With a project of this magnitude there, the entire locality is bound to benefit; not to mention the whole country since such developments potentially attract millions of euros in foreign investment. Can you imagine St Julian's without Portomaso today? Or San Ġorġ without Bay Street? Or all the projects done there by the Eden Group? What would you rather have? The whole Mistra Village area broken up into little plots and sold off to hundreds of buyers to be developed into apartments and maisonettes over the next 20 or 30 years?... or a project of this sort to elevate the whole district, built and completed within maybe 4-5 years?... With one developer to control rather than a hundred. This is private land that is already disturbed, it's at the top of a hill and there's absolutely nothing wrong with building higher rise here! The problem as I see it is that the NGOs are simply complaining for the sake of making their voices heard sometimes."

In reality, the site in question rubs shoulders with an area of high landscape value, designated as such by Mepa due to its position high up on a ridge.

The development of the massive tower at Mistra will introduce yet another eyesore visible from Mellieħa, Selmun and even from Mistra. Comparing Portomaso and Bay Street in an urban conglomerate such as St Julian's/Paceville to the relatively open Xemxija environs is incoherent to say the least.

Although the site is already disturbed, it is still ecologically important and a development with a reduced visual impact such as Mistra Village would have done the site more justice.

Only time will tell whether sacrificing more land with rural landscapes for presumed economic windfalls to the country is actually worthwhile. Rather than shooting from the hip, some contributors should rummage through existing documentation.

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