

Closing the floodgates?



The petrol station at Triq Buqana, close to Chadwick Lakes, still under development (see photo), should militate against further ODZ petrol station relocation. But another application proposes the relocation of the petrol station on Mġarr Square to an ODZ site on the approach to Żebbiegħ.

Expectations may be high that the issue of building outside development zones will be settled once and for all. Yet, until such a pipedream materialises, obscenities continue to surface.

An application concerning Wied L-Isperanza in Mosta (PA 02446/07) is currently at vetting stage and proposes the demolition of existing garages and construction of an underground car park (36 lock-up garages), 24 residential units and four penthouses.

Originally, the existing garages were subject to an enforcement notice (ECF00950/01), which was dropped once the garages were incorporated in the recent rationalisation scheme. To crown it all, the developer now aims for a towering residential development to dominate the skyline above Wied L-Isperanza.

Application number PA00667/08 refers to the latest petrol station relocation to an undeveloped ODZ area in Żebbiegħ along Triq il-Mosta, literally on the doorstep of the former hamlet.

As with the petrol station at Triq Buqana, located just a stone's throw away from Chadwick Lakes, still under construction, this is another proposal under the premise that an existing petrol station will be moved out of a residential area (Mġarr square).

The major snag to blight this seemingly commendable move is that the applicant also proposes the relocation of mechanic facilities and a showroom for sale of vehicles to the same idyllic ODZ spot, which normally houses vegetable hawkers. The country is replete with spectres of vacant showrooms up for sale.

A few miles away, PA 02359/05 proposes the sanctioning of stables constructed in the midst of Wied Qirda, Żebbuġ. The technical jargon on the online application details states that is 'in line with policy guidelines on agriculture farm diversifications and stables'.

This application was originally refused in February 2006, only for this decision to be overturned last February, contrary to Directorate recommendations. This sets a dangerous precedent for Wied Qirda which, if recent rumblings are anything to go by, is now firmly in the sights of developers.

Past misdemeanours

The last column in this series featured a photo of a monstrous concrete construction towering over the valley at Wardija (Ta' Busewdien). From further combing, it has transpired that the indicated building is covered by PA 7789/96 issued in March 1998 against a fine. This permit in fact amended already-approved plans issued in November 1990.

Information given by the public relations office of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, shows that the same structure was once subject to enforcement action in ECF 426/94 as building works had started when the permit had expired. The case was appealed, but dismissed in favour of Mepa.

However, the same notice ceased in operation when PA 2006/89 was renewed in February 1995 for additions and extensions to an existing building. Hence, what looks like a garish, derelict building is indeed an approved one, by virtue of the applicant's graft. Nothing seems too obtrusive or brazen for those in the decision seats.

February ODZ applications

Some would interpret the large number of ODZ applications in February (117) as pre-electoral bonanza. I would rather point to the Maltese hankering for ODZ development, literally ingrained in the local DNA. One can dissect further these applications as follows, to highlight the fact that the current ODZ onslaught spares no locality in Malta.

Fifteen applications refer to proposed non-agricultural developments on pristine land (i.e. not on the site of previous developments). These include sites at Wardija, Mellieħa, Dingli, Rabat (Bieb ir-Ruwa), Żejtun, Żurrieq, Għargħur and, the lion's share, in Gozo (Kerċem, Fontana, Xagħra, Marsalforn).

Of these, the most brazen must be PA 08075/94, proposing a bungalow and basement at Wardija, PA 00236/08 proposing a swimming pool at il-Kantra, Ta' Ċenċ, in one of the most compelling and ecologically important sites on the islands.

PA 07827/07 proposes the erection of dwellings in Mgarr (Malta), while PA 00344/08 proposes the erection of a swimming pool along Triq ix-Xagħri (Garigue Road, paradoxically) in Fontana.

PA 00522/08 proposes a three-storey development (with basement garages, apartments and penthouses) along Triq Selmun, Mellieħa. PA 00342/08 proposes a two-storey house at Xagħra, PA 00217/08 proposes a two-storey house and swimming pool along Triq it-Torri, Kerċem, and PA 07762/07 proposes the erection of even more garish flats and garages along the already pillaged coastline of Xwejni Bay, Marsalforn, in what is already a flat-saturated Gozo.

The applicant is bound to contend that a precedent was recently set through the approval of a similar application close by. The remaining 12 applications refer to other unsavoury developments in ODZ areas, such as garages and more dwellings.

A total of 35 applications refer to proposed agricultural developments. One may dismiss these as less insidious than the first category, but some merit greater scrutiny, especially those referring to large-scale developments such as the relocation of 13 cattle farms and the construction of a manure clamp and the construction of new pig farms.

The frequency of other smaller-scale developments also raises some concerns, in particular the welter of agricultural store and reservoir applications. Twenty refer to proposed sanctioning of ODZ illegalities, 15 refer to proposed demolitions and redevelopments of existing sites, and the remaining 32 refer to a medley of other applications.

Green Politician Award ruckus

Much has been written by media pundits and newspapers about Nature Trust's decision to award the Green Politician of the Year Award to an MP currently embroiled in the Mistra Spin Valley saga.

Few of the detractors, however, deigned to mention that the award was handed out, without raising any eyebrows, way back in 2002, when there was no hint of the Mistra controversy, and when the MP in question was a veritable environmental crusader. It was also worth pointing out that the NGO was the first to censure the processing of the Mistra application.

With hindsight in hand, every correspondent can take the 'I-told-you-so' stance, but there were certainly no voices of dissent on the identity of the award's beneficiary back in 2002.

I will certainly not dwell on the merits or otherwise of the individual, whose case is still being investigated, but the current Mistra saga does not take away the polish from the bestowment of such an award six years ago, which was done in good faith and on facts available at that time.

Lashing out at NGOs seems to be quite fashionable, however, especially by the sensationalist faction of the local media. Under the circumstances, I would scuttle the whole award altogether since, locally, there appears to be a gulf between the terms 'green' and 'politician'.