

Falzon's legacy lives on in Luqa



The revised fireworks factory policy has paved the way for a massive extension of the existing factory at Luqa, despite objections from numerous quarters.

Another dawn... same old script... more Outside development Zone (ODZ) development being approved on the flimsiest of pretexts, with few batting an eyelid.

During a Save the Countryside debate organised by Din l-Art Hejwa last year, then parliamentary secretary Michael Falzon had challenged those present to mention at least one large ODZ development, barring the Żonqor one, that had been approved so far under his watch. By applying such an arbitrary threshold, Falzon shrewdly drew a blank from those present and managed to steer the public gaze away from the ongoing piecemeal and unremitting encroachment in ODZ areas by agricultural stores, pump rooms, agrotourism facilities, fireworks factories and other developments.

Responsibility for the renewed surge of development in ODZ areas falls partly on Falzon's shoulders since he steered the crucial changes to the relevant policies which are ushering in the approval of such developments.

In the case of the fireworks factory policy, he went one step further as he chaired the committee that formulated the draft policy in view of his passion for fireworks.

The recent scandalous approval of a gargantuan extension to the existing fireworks factory at Luqa, which will result in the entire complex having a total of 26 rooms, was waved through on the back of this revised policy. In fact, the proponents of the extension and even the Mepa case officer, made specific reference to the provisions of this tailor-made policy so as to rebut the legitimate concerns raised by the Environment Protection Directorate, the Natural Heritage Advisory Committee, as well as by NGOs, residents and farmers.

The Luqa valley in which the fireworks factory is located is already marred by numerous other unrelated illegal developments, including garages and impromptu car scrapyards. Despite this, the site earmarked for the extension in question still has a large number of mature trees, some of which were deemed 'inappropriate' according to application for the extension, and thus need to be removed.

Trees have this annoying habit of getting in the way of development, it seems, and must inevitably face the chop, as will happen in Luqa. Proponents will counter that new trees will be planted to compensate, but at the end of the day this is scant solace for the mature trees we are losing.

Proposal to extend L-Aħrax campsite

It seems that the owner of the campsite at L-Aħrax tal-Mellieħa also has expansionist ambitions as he recently submitted an application for a further 4,000-metre increase in the footprint of the campsite.

What should be a wilderness area at the extremity of Malta's main island has already ended up as a clutter of caravans and ancillary facilities, with the footprint of disturbance extending beyond the confines of the camping site, in the form of impromptu parking areas and mounds of rubble.

The campsite, approved in 2001, has already been extended once, in 2010. The site earmarked for the latest proposed extension has been degraded through the dumping of used stone slabs, in what has become a tried and tested protocol – first degrade, then develop. The possibility of further encroachment by the camping site should be nipped in the bud by Mepa's screening letter on the application.



The site proposed for the L-Ahrax camping site extension has already been degraded... a case of twisting Mepa's arm?

What is interesting is that no one has flagged the glaring conflict of interest in this case. The application for the extension was filed by architect Robert Sarsero, who sits on Mepa's Tribunal for Environmental and Planning Review, a fancy name for the board where applicants can appeal any refusals from the main Mepa board. Sarsero is not new to filing applications for ODZ developments; he was involved in similar applications for an old people's home in Santa Luċija and in Mtarfa.

Conflicts of interest in the planning domain are not limited to Sarsero, however. Robert Musumeci is currently a consultant to the government on the Lands Department reform and was previously a consultant on Mepa, while still running his private practice as an architect. Meanwhile, despite being a Labour MP in Parliament, architect Charles Buhagiar also regularly represents clients with plans for developments in ODZ areas, such as the approved recently reservoir and agricultural store at Ix-Xagħra tal-Buskett, l/o Rabat, and others still awaiting a decision, such as a old people's home in Vittoriosa.

Trawling through the comments submitted online by the public in response to the camping site story when it first broke in the media one ends up disillusioned with the way most people perceive ODZ areas.

One commenter sought to downplay the significance of the extension plans by stating that the ODZ area in question "is not being enjoyed by the public at the moment".

Such a utilitarian attitude leaves me speechless. The public has a right to enjoy undeveloped, unfenced public areas simply for their landscape value. These public areas do not need to be physically exploited in some way or another. People should be allowed to walk through or past them without being confronted with eyesores or development of any kind.

Folly at Dwejra

Nature Trust (Malta) recently sent a report to Mepa about the possible use of explosives by individuals to widen the tunnel connecting the Inland Sea with the outer seashore.

Hearsay has it that this is a hare-brained scheme by those unscrupulous enough to put in jeopardy the integrity of this unique geomorphological feature at Dwejra simply to facilitate the access of boats and thus ramp up profits. Luckily, most vessel owners in the area oppose this folly.



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