

Mepa reform misgivings



Illegal activity, such as the dumping of rubble on agricultural land at Ghaxaq, frequently goes unnoticed.

Having attended the national conference on the Malta Environment and Planning Authority reform held last week, I need to air a few concerns.

One could not help but note that developers far outnumbered NGO representatives and environmentalists at the conference. This does not augur well.

It could be attributed to the fact that the conference was organised, rather naively (or not) on a weekday. Developers could have sensed that the time is right for them to exert pressure on the Office of the Prime Minister to steer the reform in the direction they desire.

Some of the interventions verged on the preposterous. A well-known local developer - who happens to be a senior figure in the Chamber for Small and Medium Enterprise - GRTU, warned that there was a possibility that the number of planning applications would drop.

In a small island like ours, stifled by an annual unsustainable number of planning applications, this would be a godsend. Another leading GRTU exponent said those living in outside development zone areas should not be discriminated against and should have similar rights to those living within scheme areas.

My jaw almost dropped - the planning process is an intrinsically discriminatory one. It discriminates between areas to be developed and those which cannot. If you buy a residence in an ODZ area, you must deal with the baggage and constraints this brings with it.

My third bone of contention is this: In a national conference, one expects that individuals intent on voicing their personal issues should be excluded since it wastes valuable time.

Lastly, very few of those present spared a thought for the environment section of Mepa, which is direly in need of additional resources.

NGO misgivings, namely that too much power will be wielded by the OPM as a result of the reform, seem to have made their way to the Prime Minister, who was quick to reassure those present that the revision of the Structure Plan, the local plans and issuing of permits would still be Mepa's prerogative.

He also reaffirmed Mepa's independence and autonomy - only time will tell if his words carry any weight. Everyone is watching and there's much at stake - let's hope it doesn't fail. Those deliberating on the reform should keep developers and their lobbies at arm's length.

New slum area at Tad-Dib, Mosta

The ill-fated rationalisation exercise of 2006 can potentially claim yet another victim - this time at an area known as Tad-Dib in Mosta.

An application has been submitted for the development of no less than 650 flats on 150 plots, in what can be aptly described as 'mass, humourless development'.

The land in question, which rubs shoulders with the Cumbo Tower (which would be eclipsed if the development is given the green light), a cemetery and the ruins of a 1930s farmhouse, has

the hallmarks of past agricultural activity. These include kanali tat-tirgħa, or one-metre-deep parallel trenches filled with rubble and meant to conserve water moisture in the soil.

All agricultural activity in the area stalled almost the day after the areas were incorporated in the new building schemes unveiled in 2006.

Further updates from Ghajn Żejtuna

Skimming through the North West Local Plan (NWLP), one encounters the following telling statement: "... protection for this part of the coast due to the pressure it is subjected to from boathouses and beach rooms located further east and on the coastal zone of Santa Maria Estate. This policy ensures that no further degradation through inappropriate developments is permitted."

Consider this in light of a further planning application for a communal cesspit to be located right in front of existing boathouses along the uncommitted coastal stretch (designated as a Level 2 of Ecological Importance under Structure Plan policies RCO 9 and 10).

This application precedes the development of further boathouses on the same spot - first you apply for the infrastructure and then you develop a particular stretch.

The Ghajn Żejtuna environs are already bearing the scars of the dumping of rubble, levelling and clearing of garigue and subsequent concreting close to the small pebble beach, all within a Safeguarded Area Zone supposedly protected under provisions of the NWLP.

An enforcement notice was issued, only for the hearing to be deferred for the second time running at the end of last month.

With the much publicised Mepa reform currently in the offing, will the Ghajn Żejtuna case become the first one that divests the reform of its credibility?

Effects of pollution

Stanley Farrugia Randon has added yet another notch to his tally of educational books by releasing the booklet entitled *It-Tniġġis u s-Saħħa*, which elaborates on the negative health effects of pollution emanating from various sources, such as power stations, traffic, construction works, smoking, and so on.

Since Farrugia Randon is a doctor and an environmentalist (he is a council member of Din L-Art Ħelwa), the booklet is an asset in that it bridges environmental concerns with medical expertise.

In addition to the various useful anecdotes and non-technical jargon used, which makes it easily digestible by the layman, an opening historical passage by Farrugia Randon caught my eye.

It recounts the story of how a certain Antonio Haxach, in 1623, had commented on the general good state of health of the Maltese, which he attributed to good air quality - quite a far cry from today's clouds of dust, smoke and fine particulates.

Frame this against the recent news item that all public service buses passed their emissions test!