

MEPA in August



This is what a land pocket looks like. Why doesn't the government purchase such pockets (some of them are government-owned already) to compensate aggrieved land owners with?

I have harped several times on MEPA's languor in addressing planning queries, despite vaunting that it continuously solicits public co-operation in fighting illegal development, clearing dumps, etc. But it seems that the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was when none of the five queries (together with photos) I posted to MEPA over three weeks ago were formally addressed.

Hence, while being conscientious means taking the pains to scour Malta with one's camera for illegal development, I am left completely in the dark on whether action is being taken. A case in point is a budding dump at L-Imsejjet Valley, l/o Mosta, part of the recently scheduled valley system, reported in these columns.

MEPA claimed to have closed off the area and to have caught a truck driver red-handed. I accordingly lauded MEPA for its cogent response. However, reports are coming in that trucks are still entering the site once again; the same is happening at Tal-Marg (between Mtarfa and Mdina), where truckloads of soil are being shuttled to and from the site, despite two enforcement notices being meted out.

Law-breakers seem to have a predilection for targeting August as the month in which there is an upsurge in their activities, knowing full well that MEPA is crippled with numerous staff members on leave and other administrative problems.

What's different this time in Qala

The outrageous Hondoq ir-Rummien yacht marina proposal has been resurrected, conveniently at a time when tourism figures are in the doldrums.

If, last time, Qala residents wrung their hands to defeat the proposal, this time their response appears to be much more muted, allegedly since their wings are being clipped from various 'quarters' with vested interests in the project.

Two other yacht marinas (Xemxija and Marsascala) in the pipeline, too. Swimming pool bathing only from now on.

When?

When will the sanctioning stop? (I am heartened to hear that MEPA has clamoured for the closing of 'legal loopholes', which are abetting sanctioning.) Only when this happens can we say that the ODZ (outside development zone) extension has been a worthy sacrifice.

When will the much acclaimed publication of the list of beneficiaries of the ODZ extension go ahead? When will the rent law revision and NGO legislation see the light of day?

When will we have an Opposition that does not pander to the masses and hence is credible when asking for a stop to building development?

Hilarious FZD

The local political scene always provides some cue for hilarity. Take the diametrically opposed views taken by Francis Zammit Dimech (Tourism Minister) and by the MHRA (the Hoteliers' and Restaurant Owners Association), who are supposedly working in the same field.

While the MHRA expressed consternation at the recent ODZ extension, the former raised more than one eyebrow by stating: "The extensions to the development building zones were in no way inconsistent with the efforts to boost tourism."

I wonder whether the minister has ever skimmed through the voluminous correspondence in the letter pages by tourists who remonstrate vehemently about building sites or seen the press release by the St Paul's Bay Bars and Restaurants Association on the detrimental effect of construction during the summer months.

Unrealistic tourism operators

In the same vein, Dr Zammit Dimech stated that the third strategic plan for tourism (2006-2009) was being launched for consultation, with the plan setting a long-term target beyond 2009 for tourism to reach a peak of 1.5 million tourists per annum.

So now talk of bringing over quality tourists over to Malta, rather than mass tourism (especially by proponents of golf courses) seems to have fizzled out. Professor Jeremy Boissevain is spot on when in an interview in another local paper he stated that the advent of thousands more tourists can only put more stress on the island's infrastructure.

With 1.2 million tourists annually, Malta already has the highest tourist density in the world. Let's assume an average of nine nights spent by every tourist in Malta and let's divide that by the number of days in a year - you get a staggering 30,000 tourists on our shores on average every day.

Now we know that that figure is much higher during the summer months. With 1.5 million annual tourists, the figure shoots up to 40,000 daily tourists (even 50,000-60,000 in summer), besides the 400,000 locals. Unrealistic, but then we need to justify in some way the usurpation in the Eighties and Nineties of most of our accessible shoreline for chicken feed by the hotel industry.

Silver linings

The Lands Department has finally woken up from its slumber to remove an illegally erected metal railing next to the Sunny Coast facilities in Bugibba, following complaints by the public. A similar intervention appears to be again begging at Pebbles Lido in Sliema.

MEPA should also be commended for taking the bull by the horns in demolishing illegally constructed rooms at Delimara, despite eleventh-hour legal ploys resorted to by their 'owners'.

Some respect for indigenous trees is finally being instilled, with the courts handing down a sentence worth its salt (Lm2,400 for the cutting down carobs in Xaghra, Gozo). Our courts should also be commended for fining three Gozitans Lm11,000 for illegally importing 155 bird skins from Egypt.

Finally, the Agriculture Departure gets the thumbs up for stating that future tree pruning should have its prior consent and for its financial assistance towards the publication of the local natural history journal, published by Nature Trust, The Central Mediterranean Naturalist.