

## Electoral manifesto vs holistic planning



More blocks of flats are planned to be built in this site highlighted at Xlendi. Is there really such a demand to sacrifice more of what's left of this inlet's aesthetic value?

It's a parrot secret that when it comes to planning policies, governments are more concerned with fulfilling their electoral manifesto commitments than opting for a more judicious, holistic approach.

This worn-out axiom is being played out yet again at the moment, with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and government insisting that it's a matter of weeks before the first draft of the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development (Sped) is finalised, while concurrently bending head over heels to usher in new policy proposals (floor area ratio, outside development zone, solar farms, cemeteries, hotel heights adjustment, fuel stations, revision of local plans, shooting ranges, firework factories, and so on).

The imminent release of the Sped makes it more incumbent upon Mepa to halt the approval of new policies as these might not be consonant with the strategy laid down in the plan, especially in sensitive areas such as the proposed ODZ changes, which incidentally are offline once again, such that people cannot see whether their submissions have received the necessary attention. It is hoped that Mepa will respect its pledge to re-issue another draft of the proposed ODZ changes for further public consultation.

Mepa should not give in to pressure to go for piecemeal and tailored policies that will feather the nest of a number of interest groups, such as those with concrete proposals for agri-tourism ventures, cemeteries and other projects in ODZ areas. These views have been echoed by NGO Din I-Art Helwa during recent meetings and correspondence with the Parliamentary Committee on Environment and Development and the Parliamentary Secretary for Mepa Michael Farrugia.

Some of the policy proposals, such as the fireworks factories one, explicitly states that the policy overrides any provisions on the same type of development stipulated in local plans, which is blasphemous from a planning perspective.

The much-touted land reclamation proposals, bandied around so much during the electoral campaign, are being hoisted upon us in a policy lacuna, since no ad hoc Marine Spatial Plan (MSP), or at least a marine strategy topic paper, has been compiled as yet for the Maltese islands. It transpires that a draft of the Structure Plan review, dating back to 2006, did factor in land reclamation within its policies. This, however, is not a substitute for a fully-fledged MSP that fully assesses the implications of land reclamation.

### Mistra's toxic legacy

Much has already been written on the odious construction of the juggernaut blocks of apartments at Mistra – the understandable hype around the issue has even led to the coining of the term 'Mistrification' – referring to the despoiling of an area through irrational development.

One of the issues most often raised by detractors of the project is its impact on traffic flow in the area, with the hundreds of cars of the new apartment tenants adding to the already burgeoning traffic flow up Xemxija Hill.

Despite this obvious impact on traffic flows in the area, Transport Malta was anomalously silent during the last hearing on the case. The reason for this is that the increased traffic flow will be catered for by widening an existing road (Mejjiesa Road) which meanders through the hamlet of Manikata.

As a photo accompanying this column shows, the road widening will result in even more arable land being sacrificed to make way for more tarmac and asphalt, while effectively transforming a formerly tranquil hamlet into yet another drive-through zone.

Ironically, the application in question (PA 03337/13) was submitted by Mellieħa local council after a similar previous application (EC 619/09), submitted by the same council, was rejected and even subjected to enforcement action.

### **Further stifling Xlendi**

In this column I have often exposed cases that do not comply with existing planning policies. The recent granting of PA 03140/13 took a somewhat different route. The permit involved the renewal of a previously expired permit (PA 2618/07) granted in 2009 after an outline permit was granted in 2002, so its approval was a foregone conclusion given that the new planning application merely requested the renewal of the previous permit.

In addition, according to the case officer's report, there are no planning constraints for the site, which extends from Simon Street (the primary coastal road at Xlendi extending from the parking area right up the hill to the residential blocks) up to Punic Street, as the proposal complies with height restrictions and zoning scheme as a residential area as per the relevant local plan. So far, no eyebrows raised.

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What merits attention, however, is the impact of this latest concrete eyesore on the left side of the Xlendi inlet, with a sheer wall 10 storeys high, albeit receding slightly with height, rising from Simon Street, effectively turning the public staircase close by into a claustrophobic vortex flanked by high walls on each side.

Blissful indeed... how does this tally with eco Gozo, if ever there was such a strategy in the first place?

### **Tourism with a difference**

Between February 5 and 9, a group of 40 University students took part in an eco tour in the Egadian Islands, off the western tip of Sicily.

During the visit the students visited various attractions including the salt museum in Trapani, the Office of the Marine Protected Area in Favignana, the caves in Marettimo, where the endangered monk seal has been recently sited, and the prehistoric cave Grotta del Genovese in Levanzo.

Several other activities including trekking in the mountains and cycling in the countryside. Students also had the opportunity to learn more about the islands' biodiversity and ecosystem. Before, during and after the visit, students gave feedback on the eco tour that will be used for research purposes.

The event was organised by University-based student organisation Youth for the Environment in collaboration with Karl Agius, a PhD student focusing his research on the potential of ecotourism in central Mediterranean islands.

### **Marine messages**

The European Environment Agency recently released report entitled Marine Messages: Our Seas, Our Future – Moving Towards a New Understanding, which may be viewed at [www.eea.europa.eu/publications/marine-messages](http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/marine-messages).

The report sheds light on the link between many Europeans, European economies and coastal and marine areas, and manages to communicate in a highly condensed and illustrated manner, the message that a multitude of pressures threatening the integrity of the European seas.

These pressures are so intense that sustainable productive use of these seas is still an elusive mirage, despite being one of the cardinal points of Blue Growth in Horizon 2020. For instance:

- European seas extend for over 11 million square kilometres, exceeding the continent's land surface;
- Twenty-three out of the 28 EU member states are fringed by the sea;
- Forty-one per cent of all Europeans (206 million citizens) live in a coastal region;

- The gross added value of maritime activities across Europe adds up to €330 billion;
- A total of 5.4 million EU citizens are employed in such maritime activities.
- A marine area in 25 overseas countries and territories is managed by France, the Netherlands, the UK and Denmark. Despite this, only three per cent of marine habitats registered a favourable conservation status according to the Habitats Directive and only 20 per cent of marine biodiversity features (species, habitats, ecosystems) registered a Good Environmental Status (GES) according to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD);
- Only 66 per cent of the European marine area is covered in the initial assessment of the MSFD due to a dearth of knowledge and data on the remaining areas, and 70 per cent of the European maritime boundaries are still under contention by two or more neighbouring countries.
- Seagrasses are on the decline, marine litter (including insidious microplastics) and noise are on the upsurge as are sea temperature, eutrophication and pressure from non-indigenous or exotic species.

## **Mature gardens and FAA**

Two Sundays ago in this column I inadvertently omitted giving due credit to the NGO Flimkien Għall-Ambjent Aħjar (FAA) for its sterling work in favour of local mature gardens.

This is regretted, especially in view of the NGO's dogged campaign to save the local natural and built heritage.

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