

From pig farms to wedding halls?



While the filming industry is assuming a more important role locally, its environmental impact must be mitigated. The conditions imposed upon the operators of the Agora film site at Tas-Silġ should be enforced, including the full rehabilitation of the site once works are over.

Application PA 00262/06 refers to the proposed conversion of a pig farm to a wedding and multi-purpose hall including a private parking area to cater for the hall close to the Għar Barka hamlet, limits of Rabat.

The proposal was first refused in April 2007 but the applicant filed for a reconsideration, which is still pending, even if the Malta Environment and Planning Authority Directorate's recommendation is for an endorsement of the original decision.

Rummaging through the justifications given by Mepa as to why it turned down the application the first time round, a number of reasons surface.

Since the proposed development is not of a non-urban type and since the site is an outside development zone, the development runs counter to structure plan policies.

There is no justification as to why the development cannot be sited in a zone schemed for development. The site in question has been designated as an 'Open Space Gap between Settlements' by the NorthWest Local Plan.

The reuse of agricultural buildings is permitted only for agricultural purposes, as stipulated by policies. Despite this, a similar application was also submitted last March for the conversion of a pig farm into a dwelling with swimming pool at Tal-Gawhar, Safi.

The development would have a deleterious impact on the site, in terms of noise generation, traffic considerations, and so on.

Policy stipulates that rural conservation areas of scenic value will be protected and enhanced.

A lesson to be learnt from such an application is that greater clarity and coherence should be solicited by Mepa from applicants when submitting a description of their proposal.

It is only seasoned objectors who take the trouble of visiting Mepa offices to view detailed proposal plans. People normally simply rely on the affixed site notice.

Referring to the case in caption as 'a multi-purpose hall' is too vague a term and will not allay fears of residents that this might well be another disco development. One hopes that the proposed development and others of its timbre are ditched once and for all to maintain some semblance of rural fabric in farming communities.

March ODZ mill

All statements about addressing the environmental deficit in this country and the need to reform Mepa pale when compared with the burgeoning load of ODZ applications.

In fact, during the month of March, a total of 122 ODZ applications were submitted. Of these, 14 refer to new (i.e. on undeveloped, pristine sites) residential and industrial developments.

It has almost become a cliché but Gozo reserves the highest number of ODZ applications for new residential development. This includes the application to construct dwelling and rebuild rubble walls along Triq Franġisk Portelli in Għarb, another for the construction of a residence with pool along Triq San Pietru, Għarb... the list goes on.

Other despicable applications include the construction of six industrial garages along Triq ir-Ramla in Magħtab, in what is becoming a de facto industrial area in the midst of rural settings, and the extension of the existing Ramla Bay Hotel in Marfa through the addition of a further 102 rooms. Another application, believe it or not, proposes the construction of boathouses at Santa Marija Estate in Mellieħa. What about the other illegally-constructed boathouses on site?

Of the many proposed changes of use, two applications raise questions, especially in view of the current hiatus over fireworks factories. Application PA 0923/08 proposes the replacement of an existing dilapidated building with a fireworks factory at Ta' Busbesija in Mosta and PA 0513/08 refers to the proposed addition of two further rooms to an existing fireworks factory at Wied il-Qoton in Għaxaq.

The stables fad

Of the ODZ applications submitted in March, no less than eight refer to the development of stables. One might attribute this to a recent upsurge in the local passion for horses, far beyond the confines of the Marsa track. In fact, applications for stables have been submitted for sites in Żebbug, Siggiewi, Għargħur, Marsascalea, Żurrieq, Attard, Żebbug (Gozo) and Kerċem.

The Mepa policy and guidance approved document on 'Agriculture, Farm Diversification and Stables' casts in stone, the conditions which must be satisfied for the approval of ODZ stables, while the stabling of horses through the rehabilitation, conversion or change of use of an existing abandoned building, particularly an abandoned livestock farm building, is also not a foregone conclusion and is subject to strict conditions too.

The criteria laid down by the Department of Agriculture are even more stringent and stipulate that the land must not be good quality agricultural land and neither be environmentally sensitive. The stables must not be within 100 metres of existing residences (but within 300m of existing development), the site has to be properly landscaped, the owner has to be a certified horse breeder, and so on.

Mepa should keep its eyes peeled over the current stables craze as it may well be just another devised expedient to gain a foothold in ODZ areas (with ancillary facilities even being converted in fully-blown residences in the future).

Clarification

I have been informed by offroading aficionados that the photo carried in the last column referring to a site in Buskett actually depicted the tyre markings of an agricultural vehicle, rather than an offroad vehicle.

The AWDC (All Wheels Drive Club) is striving to create greater environmental awareness among its members and always avoids environmentally sensitive sites for events. The error is regretted.

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