

Trial by Facebook



Building rubble dumped close to San Dimitri chapel, Gozo. Not the best way to help the island's ailing tourism industry.

Facebook continues to live up to its billing as the quintessential portal of populism, giving vent to the most knee-jerk and short-sighted views on a variety of issues.

The latest cause celebre to come to the fore was the Malta-Gozo bridge issue, with proponents of this development even opening a group on the social networking site to clamour for what they see as the quick-fix solution to queues of cars at Mgarr.

The group, which to date boasts almost 5,000 members, features some sob stories, such as those of a group of youngsters being stuck for two hours at Mgarr waiting for the ferry. It would be a sorry predicament indeed if the authorities are coerced into even considering such a preposterous development just because some spoilt brats are too impatient to wait along with the others.

The frequency of the ferry service is such that, barring the mass migrations experienced for Carnival, Santa Marija and other big events, the wait at Mgarr is normally minimal.

Fortunately, a few did seek to enlighten the others about the massive environmental impact such a project would have, namely on the smothering of life on the seabed, such as seagrass meadows, through the dumping of rubble and laying of foundations on the seabed.

The people who harp on about the urgent need for such a bridge probably don't attach too much importance to environmental considerations when it comes to their own comfort, but seagrass meadows just happen to be protected at European level as they provide a priority habitat for the sustaining of marine biodiversity.

The recent statement by the Labour Party's spokesman for planning, Roderick Galdes, that the development of an airstrip in Gozo is one of the options a future Labour government would consider to address the ailing tourism industry in Gozo, must be framed in the same context. The Nationalist Party has flirted with the runway proposal in the past, with the tourism and environment secretariat rightly question-ing the sustainability of the project.

What the ailing tourism industry in Gozo needs is not more noise, pollution, and emissions, or less agricultural land, but someone to get to grips with the speculation gnawing at sites in Outside Development Zones, and the shambles of sites that lie off the beaten track.

For example, mounds of building rubble have been ingloriously dumped right along what is surely one of the most popular walks in Gozo - a stone's throw away from San Dimitri chapel and Wied I-Ghasri, against the backdrop of the towering Ta' Gordan lighthouse.

Another example of the lack of respect for the environment in Gozo is the deplorable cluttering of streets by construction industry trucks in supposedly peaceful villages such as Kerċem, and the ongoing proposed ribbon development along the Qbajjar-Xwejini seafront.

Islands are special due to their inherent isolation and reduced connection with the mainland. Gozo should not seek to be a carbon copy of Ibiza but instead should market its untamed, wild aspects. Safeguarding and promoting Gozo's uniqueness must surely be the wisest tourism marketing strategy.

Mellieħa council's welcome move

I have repeatedly mentioned in this column the rampant parking of cars along the clay slopes of Mġiebaħ during the summer months, which exacerbates the erosion of the cliffs. As a result of this parking, deep gulleys can now be seen running through the clay slopes.

Mellieħa council appears to have seized the bull by its horns by installing signs on site to inform drivers that parking on the slopes is not permitted. It has even sent a warden on site during weekends for enforcement.

In addition, the council has submitted to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority a number of proposed measures concerning the siting of a car park for visitors to the beach at Mġiebaħ to provide an alternative, which would hopefully eliminate the need to park on the clay slopes.

Marsalforn waterpolo case

It appears that the saga of Planning Application case no. 01894/07 is nowhere near over. The application, which was first submitted in 2007, proposed the excavation of a 375-square-metre seawater pool and the annexation of stretches of public foreshore close to the Otters waterpolo complex in Marsalforn. It was originally rebuffed in January 2008 and a subsequent reconsideration of the decision was again turned down in 2009.

The applicants chose not to throw in the towel and filed an appeal, which was scheduled for another hearing this week. This again has been deferred due to force majeure, with no other postponements possible.

There is still a possibility that this ODZ application to further encroach on the public foreshore may be dropped. According to the grapevine the applicants are ready to ditch their proposal if the government's pre-electoral pledge to develop a heated swimming pool within the Victoria Sports Complex materialises.

Echoes of scheme rationalisation

In this column I have been (and still am) one of the most vociferous critics of the scheme rationalisation exercise carried out in 2006.

Echoes of that exercise are still reverberating.

For example, Planning Control application 00046/09 has been submitted calling for the designation of height limitations and for zoning in an ODZ site included for development in 2006 at Tal-Braġġ in Mellieħa, along the upper reaches of the depression which eventually leads to Mġiebaħ Valley.

The term 'parcel' is somewhat of a misnomer since the size of the site in question is significant and includes agricultural land and numerous trees. Part of the same area has been officially granted to the applicant as compensation for another parcel of land at Tas-Sellum, also in Mellieħa.

Despite the fact that the inclusion of such an ODZ area for development was officially sanctioned over three years ago, its earmarking for development still bites into tender flesh, especially since the site is bordered by unobstructed views of farmland and of the Selmun and Kortin areas.

The building heights being proposed for the area, which local residents and the local council have strenuously objected to, are preposterous. They consist of a semi-basement and three overlying floors, creating a precedent for the Mellieħa area and an obtrusive visual impact. I have a feeling that the ramifications of the 2006 scheme rationalisation exercise will extend deep into this decade.