

Will Gozitans be listened to?



Gozitans have spoken. They have rejected the development proposals for both Hondoq ir-Rummien and for Ta' Ċenċ. Will their views be respected in the coming weeks?

It's been a long wait, 14 years to be precise, but finally the recommendation from the Planning Directorate regarding application PA 03798/02 for the proposed development of a destination port, comprising a hotel, yacht marina and a tourist village at Hondoq ir-Rummien, Qala, has been released.

To the many who have been slogging away marshalling the voices of dissent to this proposal, most notably Front Harsien Hondoq, captained by Paul Buttigieg, the recommendation for refusal came as a huge relief, with the decision on the application scheduled for Thursday. The case officer recommended refusal for this large-scale development, which extends over 10.4 hectares (or seven football pitches) for the following six reasons:

- (i) The proposal consists of a dense urban development in a designated coastal rural area and thus goes against the principles of the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development (Sped) which seek to locate urban development in committed built areas and to protect rural and coastal areas from incompatible uses;
- (ii) The proposed development runs counter to the Sped in terms of land use in that the proposal is not considered legitimate or necessary in the rural area;
- (iii) The type, scale and density of the proposed development by far exceeds the interventions considered acceptable by Policy GZ-Qala-3 of the Gozo and Comino Local Plan to rehabilitate the damaged landscape resulting from the past quarrying activity in Hondoq ir-Rummien and to provide basic beach amenities in the area. Due to its ecological and social impacts, the proposed marina is also not compatible with the intentions of the local plan's policy GZ-TRAN-13 to provide destination ports around the Gozitan coast in order to improve the tourism product, upgrade facilities for boating and yachting while protecting the environmental resources;
- (iv) The development is incompatible with the natural characteristics of the area and with the current informal recreational use of Hondoq ir-Rummien Bay, and thus goes against the Coastal Objective 3 of the Strategic Plan for Environment and Development;
- (v) Transport Malta objects to the proposed development in view that during both the construction and the operational phases, the proposal would generate a high volume of vehicular movements that would have a significant and unacceptable impact on the road network as well as on Qala residents and users of the area, thus running counter to the principles of good transport planning;
- (vi) The proposed urban development in the designated rural coastal area is not acceptable from an environmental point of view as there is no overriding justification in terms of net environmental improvement or similar public benefit.

Consultation or shenanigan?

There is never a dull moment in the Maltese environmental scene. Sannat local council held a public consultation exercise in the form of a referendum for local residents to gauge their perception of the proposed Ta' Ċenc' Hotel extension and 15 villas, touted in a zany fashion as Malta's 'first-ever heritage park'.

There were serious misgivings about the referendum – namely, just a few days' notice was given about it and the question posed to residents seemingly glossed over the development by making no reference to the proposed villas in an Outside Development Zone.

Decisions of a planning nature should be taken on technical grounds; there are no limits to how far parochialism can be stretched

Turnout was dismal... just 22 per cent of eligible voters cast their vote, of which almost 70 per cent (290 residents) gave the proposed development the thumbs down. Given the poor turnout it might not be a resonating result but of those who voted there is a clear inclination against the proposal.

One of the latest shenanigans used by local politicians is to make the call for all decisions having a bearing on Gozo to be decided upon by Gozitans. I do not subscribe to this rationale, as decisions of a planning nature should be taken entirely on technical grounds, not on parochial ones, since there are no limits to how far parochialism can be stretched.

But going by the same yardstick bandied about by politicians nowadays, since the Gozitans have spoken on the proposed developments at Fhondoq ir-Rummien and Ta' Ċenc', the question now is whether or not these views will be respected or whether the politicians' call to consult Gozitans on these issues was nothing more than expedient hot air.



The aftermath of an arson attack on a sensitive site in Bahrija, exposing the mounds of rubble dumped on the site over the past few months – will the burnt trees be replanted?

Scorch, dump and develop?

The deliberate scorching of farmland at a site known as Tan-Namura in Bahrija, reducing it to a cinder and killing a number of mature and young carob and olive trees, has been painstakingly documented by residents of the area.

Based on the meticulous information provided by the residents it is evident that the site has borne the brunt of years of deliberate degradation, ranging from dumping of inert and metal waste to fly tipping, and culminating in the latest arson attack.

Metal drums filled with combustible material, such as dry wood, were observed under the mature trees in the area, in what appears to be a concerted effort to strip the site of its conservation importance. Was this strategy adopted simply to pave the way for the development of the area in future?

Enforcement and police officers were called on site and the case is under investigation. One hopes that the trees that were lost will eventually be replaced and that the perpetrators of the devastation are brought to book.

This case shows that active citizenship can really make a difference, with residents assuming the role of environmental stewards.

Historic court decision, but...

The Court of Appeal recently recognised the right of environmental NGOs to contest decisions taken by governing bodies, such as the Planning Authority, on matters related to the environment, such as invoking an assessment of issued permits and an investigation on whether the case exists for their reversal.

In what can be termed as a landmark decision, it has been acknowledged that environmental NGOs have an inherent juridical interest in matters pertaining to the environment, which they do not need to prove, and thus have the right to challenge granted permits. This right is now also enshrined in the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal Act, allowing environmental NGOs to even embark on class action.

However, the rub lies with the fees (to cover legal costs, for example) to lodge an appeal, which are still prohibitive for many NGOs, such that these organisations can barely afford to avail themselves of this hard-earned right, further frustrating efforts to try to create a level playing field with developers.

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