

Surprise! Agricultural stores are sprouting like mushrooms

'I told you so' must be one of the most hated and paternalistic clichés in the English language, but its use is perfectly justified in the circumstances. Environmental NGOs can, in fact, shout the phrase out loud in view of way the revised Outside Development Zone (ODZ) policies ushered in last year by the government are being put into practice to herald a new era of agricultural store buildings in the countryside.

In this column I too had raised the alarm two years ago, in December 2013, in the article 'Kissing ODZ goodbye – 3', while referring to proposed policy 2.5. I quote verbatim from the article:

"Policy 2.5 refers to agricultural stores, and even contemplates the 'need' for cold storage facilities, which could easily be housed in an industrial area. Are there any statistics that shed light on how many of these so-called 'agricultural stores' or 'tool rooms' are actually used for majjalati (suckling pig dinners), which have become the rage of late, many often against payment?

"The maximum storage entitlement for farmers have been cranked up in the latest version of the ODZ policy proposals, such that a farmer with a holding (how will holdings be determined?) ranging between five and 18 tumoli is entitled to a storage room footprint of 30 square metres, while farmers with more than 18 tumoli of land are entitled to a maximum storage room footprint of 60 square metres. Such dimensions are gargantuan for ODZ areas.

"The same dubious policy stipulates that 'permission may be granted for additional storage requirement (i.e. 10 per cent) for farmers on the basis of....". Along with a preceding policy in

the document, the message this is trying to convey is plain and simple: one should apply for a particular footprint plus an additional 10 per cent, as this will be favourably considered."

Our worst nightmares are being played out

Our worst nightmares are being played out... in fact, besides the bonanza in petrol station and fireworks factory applications, Malta is experiencing a surge in agricultural store applications and permits.

Journalists like James Debono are meticulously documenting them: Last September a permit was granted for the construction of one such store below Fort Bingemma in an area of high landscape value.

An existing store that was originally illegally built just below the Mdina fortifications was sanctioned last month despite being highly visible from il-Pjazza tas-Sur.

Over the past few weeks two store applications have been submitted in ODZ areas in Gudja and in Żebbuġ, Gozo, on the footprint of existing piles of rubble.

Not bad for a three-month stint!

In all this mess, three issues raise my hackles. For starters, all the objections raised by the Environment Protection Department (EPD), the Natural Heritage Advisory Panel (NHAP) and the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage were all predictably and conveniently brushed under the carpet.

Secondly, the case officer's hands are somewhat tied through the approval of the revised ODZ policies which entitle farmers to apply for such stores, even on the footprint of existing 'ruins'. These provisions had been excluded from the first draft of the revised policies issued in 2013, only to surreptitiously make their way back in the final approved policy in 2014.

Thirdly, the conflicts of interest in some of the store applications are blatant, to say the least. For instance, in the Mdina store sanctioning, the applicant's architect is the same person who is currently acting as a government advisor on the Mepa demerger.

Furthermore, Elisabeth Ellul, who had a hand in drafting the revised ODZ policies, chaired the Environmental Committee that overturned the case officer's recommendation for refusal on the grounds that the store was visible in photos taken in 1994. The revised policies have shifted the sanctioning goal posts forward to photos taken in 1994 whereas previously these stood at 1967, thereby making it easier to justify sanctioning.