

Blowing the eco-island concept to smithereens



If you were over the moon at the Gozo eco-island concept, then you are in for a shock. The three applications below are symptomatic of a culture prevalent in Gozo which refuses to put a stop to development.

The authorities have a mammoth task to convince Gozitans to give up their rampant development aspirations if the eco-island concept is not to flounder.

Gozo airstrip contradictions

Joe Muscat, secretary of the Gozo Tourism Authority (GTA), in his opinion piece in *The Sunday Times* on August 10, argues for the need of an airstrip in Gozo.

What the same piece conveniently omitted to include was that during 2007 the Gozitan tourist market experienced an increase of 15.5 per cent of tourists who spent a night or more in Gozo.

Gozo is served by at least 25 ferry crossings every day, much more than any other holiday island in the Mediterranean, not to mention the fact that the seaplane is providing another alternative to the ferry.

In addition, 114,400 passengers and over 27,000 vehicles made the crossing between the two islands, return trips included, over the Santa Marija week. How many more tourists can Gozo take?

It was also reported that most Gozo hotels are currently fully-booked. So is there really a need for the much-touted airstrip? Why are tourism operators never satisfied?

Especially amusing is Mr Muscat's statement, "...airstrip, well situated and blending in with the Gozitan environs."

How can you have a long concrete sliver blending in with chequered tilled fields, rubble walls and the lot? Alternattiva Demokratika's call to investigate the motive behind the perpetual dumping of construction debris at Ta' Lambert in Xewkija, the purported site of the proposed airstrip, should be followed up.

Rummaging through other news items, I came across the statement that the GTA had commissioned studies which showed the feasibility of the proposed airstrip.

Since the feasibility issue is a pivotal one in the whole argument, the GTA would do well to enlighten us all with the contents of such studies.

The publication of the studies may answer legitimate fears whether the airstrip in Gozo would end up being yet another white elephant, especially in terms of land footprint taken up. Incidentally, Mr Muscat does not delve into the merits and impacts of an eventual decommissioning of the airstrip.

Tal-Marga, Qala

For the uninitiated, Wied tal-Marga is the principal valley at Qala, Gozo, discharging directly into Hondoq ir-Rummien.

The valley is currently under siege from different quarters, with application PA 07697/06 proposing the construction of an apartment block and garage and PA 04724/07 proposing to erect five houses with pools on opposite fringes of the valley, which is being essentially hemmed in from all sides, ending up with just a narrow sliver of a watercourse (such as Wied Ghomor below Manwel Dimech bridge in Malta).

While the period for representations for the latter application is open till Tuesday, the former application has been deferred. There are numerous valid arguments as to why such an application should be turned down outright.

Besides the fact that it is designated partly as an Outside Development Zone the site is also designated as a Strategic Open Gap, which means that it should not be developed to avoid the formation of urban conurbations and to preserve the character of distinct villages and hamlets.

The excavation below the road surface as proposed by the developer could potentially impinge on the subterranean freshwater resources tapped by farmers on site.

Those who attempted to excavate in the area were soon faced with flooding problems. A total of 29 farmers from the area, along with the Qala Local Council, have submitted a signed petition along with their official opposition to the planned development.

The site directly abuts on an ecologically sensitive area. It's useless for the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's Environment Protection Department to ask for a bank guarantee to safeguard the valley and to solicit a compensatory planting of five indigenous trees by the developer when the ecologically sensitive valley area ends up rubbing shoulders with an apartment block.

The case officer for the application is recommending an approval. Did the same case officer factor in his recommendations the cumulative effect of both applications on Wied tal-Marga?

Turning a blind eye to the second application, submitted for the opposite flank of the valley, is surely tantamount to an incomplete assessment.

It seems just a matter of time before the urban fabric directly links the village of Qala with the Kuncizzjoni hamlet on the way down to Ffondq ir-Rummien.

Marsalforn waterpolo pitch application

With Mepa's refusal back on January 17 of PA 01894/07 submitted by the Otters' Aquatic Sports Club proposing the development of a waterpolo pitch and ancillary facilities at a public foreshore site in Marsalforn, we thought that the threat to public access to the foreshore had been kept at bay.

Now it seems that the same application has been reactivated, in the form of PA 05828/04, which proposes the demolition of existing stairs, reconstruction of stairs and change of use to the Gozo Sailing Club.

This proposal would breach a whole range of Structure Plan and Gozo and Comino Local Plan policies, namely Structure Plan Policy SET 11 and Local Plan Policy GZ-LMDZ-1, which stipulate that development should be carried out within the development zones. Structure Plan Policy CZM 3 stipulates that important areas like public open coasts and popular swimming areas should be safeguarded.

Structure Plan Policy BEN2 states that all development proposals should be in the interests of the general amenity of the area and should safeguard free and public access to all areas of the foreshore. And Structure Plan Policy SOC 24 states that all proposed developments should ensure an accessible environment for all its users and visitors.

In layman's terms, the proposed site is popular with bathers and should not be compromised in any way. No concrete platforms or slipways or multi-storey boathouses should be developed on the rocky foreshore in the name of promoting sports activities in Gozo. There are other committed coastal sites which should be considered by proponents of the development.