

Outside development zone? So what!



Għajnej Zejtuna Valley, Mellieħa.

The proponents of the much-contested rationalisation exercise last year justified their proposals on the premise that development schemes would be cast in stone for at least the next 10 years, affording welcome respite to beleaguered land resources.

Although this pledge has been respected so far, and the development schemes have not yet been tampered with, individuals persist in chipping away at the remaining Outside Development Zones (ODZ). Each ODZ application is an unannounced attempt at extending the existing development schemes. Let's look at some examples:

San Lawrenz

PA 06403/07 refers to the construction of three flats with underlying garages at Triq il-Wileġ, San Lawrenz, in yet another ODZ area - this time, the natural buffer between the two villages of San Lawrenz and Ĝarbi around the hamlet of San Pietru. For example, analogies of such an application are the ones originally submitted to extend the development boundaries of Naxxar and Mosta, which, once approved, led to the two villages becoming intertwined into one urban conglomerate. Will we witness the same 'village-coalescing' in Gozo, driving through one urban monologue from Mgarr to Żebbuġ?

Mellieħa

PA 05301/07 refers to the construction of nine different plots along Triq il-Qasab and Triq Ghajnej Zejtuna in Mellieħa. Despite the North West Local Plan (endorsed in July 2006) limiting any development to just a narrow wedge on both sides of the existing watercourse, the applicant had the temerity to apply to develop a largely ODZ area on site - which encroaches on ecologically important areas such as the watercourse - by describing his application as an 'Outline development permit application for the development of a site as land within limits of development boundaries in terms of current development control policy and guidance 2007'.

According to Policy Map 27 of the NWLP, the earmarked site is a safeguarded area due to its proximity to the coast and in view of its ecological value. Detractors will argue that this is a case of 'not in my back yard' in that Ghajnej Zejtuna residents are clamouring against the development since it will ruin the patch of greenery in front of their homes, also built originally in a valley.

Such an argument is not persuasive since, in a small country like ours, all sorts of precedents can be used to justify any form of development since no area on the islands has been spared from urbanisation. I am sure that Santa Marija Estate residents will also counter such arguments by protesting against similar developments planned for other regions of the islands. Hindsight gained from the development of other valleys on the islands, all of which exacerbated flooding, should teach us a lesson.

Marsalforn

PA 01894/07 refers to the construction of a seawater pool for waterpolo and swimming purposes, suspended timber decking, pump room and stores/restrooms under street. Exponents of the Otters Waterpolo Club have been writing in to newspapers trying to muster public support for their proposals. While the provision of sports-related facilities is a laudable objective in itself, some more pondering on this application is needed. Firstly, the application proposes spilling over onto adjacent land, which still happens to be part of the public foreshore.

Existing facilities should also not be dismissed lightly, since some of them were originally constructed/developed with no permits, encroaching upon and effectively requisitioning part of the public foreshore for private or commercial use. Catering facilities and even dwellings (hewn out of the soft franka on site) lie less than 10 metres away from the sea and all can boast

their own electricity supply - imagine the site with an electricity pole among sun-worshippers on a rocky coast. The Malta Environment and Planning Authority even refused a permit for the use of a canopy over part of the premises on site, even though the same canopy was still deployed.

Proponents of this development state that their proposed swimming pool will be hewn out of existing rock and would mitigate against jellyfish stings, besides being employed for waterpolo training in the winter months. While all the environmental considerations attached to the excavation of a rocky coast must be adequately weighed, one should also ensure that any developments approved on the public shoreline should provide free access to the public. No further obtrusive concrete on the existing shoreline should be permitted - three different concrete platforms already jar with the natural coastline, being used for catering, rental of sun decks and umbrellas and even as an impromptu car park.

Marsalforn (2)

PA 01735/06 refers to the construction of an apartment block with basement garages along Triq Habel it-Twil, Qbajjar, Marsalforn. Despite the site in question being flagrantly ODZ, and the former hamlet of Qbajjar already being scourged with enough faceless and monolithic apartment blocks, the case officer is recommending 'granting permission'. Since when has the licentious raping of ODZ areas received an official stamp of recommendation? One augurs that, as for cases where the case officer's report was snubbed in favour of development, Mepa should now have the courage to once again snub such a report in favour of the rural character of Qbajjar.

No matter how many sobering statistics are published, applying for permission in an ODZ area remains popular with many Maltese, who are hell-bent on carrying out their own swathe of greenery.

We might budge slightly when it comes to global warming but such goodwill does not extend to our choice for a dwelling location. On a different note, a pilot project on environmental awareness targeted at students, entitled 'Young Reporters For The Environment', was launched this week.