

The buck stops at Lands



Despite highly visible signs erected by Mgarr council, caravans still obstruct the view at Gnejna. Meanwhile, where is the refuse and sewage generated by the caravans being discharged? No authority has managed to evict these squatters.

Many government and parastatal entities have had to endure the rigours of public scrutiny and vilification over the years - these include the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (by far the largest recipient of grievances), the Water Services Corporation, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, the Transport Authority (ADT), various ministries, etc.

However, one entity manages to avoid the flak - the Lands Department. It is virtually impossible for John Citizen, let alone MEPA and other entities, to glean any information from this elusive department. A case in point is the gate barring access to Fomm ir-Rih from Gnejna, featured below, about whose legitimacy different environmental NGOs and MEPA have been vainly enquiring with Lands. Silence is the standard response from this department to similar questions on land ownership. One thus can understand why the Ramblers Association could not keep its promise to publish a map denoting public and private pathways. It is because of the lack of co-operation and support from the authorities.

The Lands Department is also refusing or is at best reluctant to proceed with the finalisation of the land registration process. Such a registry would greatly bolster MEPA's efficacy in identifying perpetrators of illegal development who, to date, are exploiting the lacuna in up-to-date land ownership and registration data since their name does not feature easily on official documents.

Some respite

The recently proposed amendments to the Development Planning Act (DPA) announced by Minister George Pullicino offer some welcome respite from the current stranglehold over ODZ areas.

Once Parliament resumes on September 24, the public will finally have a chance to know which are the MPs whose love for the environment is just skin-deep and which have genuinely green credentials. Each MP's stand on these proposals should be made public and both Government and Opposition should give MPs a free vote on the issue.

Once approved, these amendments should be applied across the board, with no occasional exceptions or precedents, and should be accompanied by a bolstering of the MEPA enforcement team.

Summer hilarity

Malta recently ranked seventh in Europe's Happy Planet Index, outperforming countries like France, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany for ecological efficiency at delivering well-being. One of the criteria considered in the ranking process was access to the coastline. One of the index's researchers was quoted as stating: "The easy access to coastlines and nature is important, and being a small island means the Maltese have easy access to the sea".

Some number-crunching will quickly prove the hollowness of this statement - apart from the fact that 60 per cent of our islands' coastline is physically inaccessible, over 90 per cent of the remainder is tourist- or industry-dominated. The remaining pockets are encroached by boathouses and caravans, while our few beaches are dominated by all kinds of beach concessions.

The index compilers should try to find parking at Gnejna, Golden Bay, Ghadira or Ghajn Tuffieha after 10 a.m., after hordes of often rowdy foreign students have taken over the beach, or to find some elbow room at Comino's Blue Lagoon.

One must also contend with the polluted beaches (Golden Bay being apparently one of them) - thanks to the numerous caravans which occupy the foreshore, it is now not advisable to swim at St Thomas Bay, because waste is discharged straight into the sea from the caravans in broad daylight. The authors of the index would have done well to replace "access to the coastline" with "access to sandy coastline" since more and more Maltese have resigned themselves to giving up a day at the beach because it's so cramped, preferring hassle-free rocky beaches, especially in the south of the island.

On another subject... trappers are now eagerly awaiting the imminent announcement of the open season. According to one blog, trappers are so anxious to know the dates because they "want to remove wild grass from their sites before the advent of rain so that the white rocket (gargir) that grows after the first rains would be left intact since this helps to entice the birds."

On reading such hogwash, my jaw almost dropped - since when have trappers become so ecologically sensitive? Views of once luxuriant thyme (saghtar)-dominated garigue scarred by trappers so they could spread their nets are what I usually associate with trappers. "Their sites" also sounds dubious, at least in the case of some trappers who squat coastal sites leased from the Lands Department supposedly for agricultural purposes, and even 'renting' it to others for a profit! The Lands Department should rectify such abuse by conducting a survey of land use and land ownership along cliff sites.

Church-related applications

Hot on the heels of the proposed development of the cemetery at Nadur on virgin land, the active lobbying by the Gozo Curia for the extension to the Citadel car park and the ignominious deal struck between the Augustinian order and the proponents of the Hondoq ir-Rummien marina development, it was time for two other related rabbits to pop out of the hat.

In fact, a significant extension to the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary facilities in Gharb is being proposed - ranging from a visitors' centre, a monastery around the shrine itself, three retreat houses, a library, and parking areas for coaches and 101 private cars, all destined to encroach on agricultural land in an ODZ area.

The development is being touted as bolstering religious tourism and the spiritual experience of visiting pilgrims, while despoiling the very rural ambience which contributes to the 'oasis of peace' which the project's proponents want to generate. What use is there for three retreat houses, when they will be surrounded by parking lots and a conglomeration of associated buildings?

What about all the excavation waste which will be generated through development of the tunnel to join the retreat houses to the car park? How will this be disposed of? Has there been such a surge in vocations recently to justify the building of yet another monastery? Some Church buildings already occupy prime locations around the islands.

Needless to say, the proposals will not ruffle many feathers at the Gharb council or with other local authorities since they include provisions for local council offices and a police station in a cleverly-masterminded set of proposals for the ODZ area.

Yet another application by the Church authorities is set to encroach on an ODZ area, this time in Malta (PA6738/06), for the proposed development of St Albert the Great College at Dawret Hal-Ghaxaq. After the customary spate of pro and con letters in newspapers, the rector of the college himself, Fr Frans Micallef, wrote to clear the air in The Sunday Times last week.

Having been instilled with sound values myself in a Church school for 13 years, I am fully aware of the moral rectitude, tenets of propriety and academic excellence imparted to students by a Church school. I am also fully aware that such proposals have been in the offing for a number of years now, so that even the South Malta Local Plan, approved in July 2006, caters for the development of two Church schools in the area known as Tal-Wilga, which was short-listed by MEPA itself, according to the same plan, since the Dominican Fathers' quarters in Valletta are too restricted to allow expansion.

However, since the Ghaxaq site is an actively farmed area and completely ODZ, have alternative sites been considered? It is laudable that the Church seeks to bolster its presence in the depressed south of the island, but the proposed development should be built in one of the brownfield, degraded sites around Ghaxaq, Birzebbuga, Tarxien, etc. Hence, benefits from the same development would include the rehabilitation of the brownfield site. I am sure that some of the land owned by the Church falls under the brownfield category.

If proponents of the development insist on the Ghaxaq site, the footprint should be taken up by educational facilities only and not by ancillaries such as car parks - light pollution from facilities such as sports grounds should be minimised and all facilities should be fully landscaped. A significant planning gain should be demanded, which would go towards the development of an afforestation project in the south of the island.

Even more roads

Minister Austin Gatt reportedly complained that environmentalists did not focus on the green credentials of the SmartCity project. He was probably referring to the technology which will be used in the construction of energy-efficient buildings, and not to the use of land resources. In fact, a new 23-metre-wide road (over 600 metres long, mostly over prime agricultural land) is being planned from Bieb is-Sultan in Zabbar to Triq Santa Liberata in Kalkara to cater for traffic associated with the new development.

An EIA is being compiled to assess the loss of agricultural land - this sounds pretty superfluous, no matter how the EIA tries to minimise it (e.g. by stating that the land is not irrigated, has poor soil quality, etc.) since, if the proposal is approved, it will mean the disappearance of more agricultural land and a growth of the existing road network which already stretches for over 2,100 km. Will the zero option in the same EIA be given due weight? What about providing for an efficient public or private transport system to ferry people to and from SmartCity rather than encouraging the use of even more cars on our choked roads?

Recently approved applications

Probably because some major development applications as those concerning Ulysses Lodge, Hondoq ir-Rummien or Ta' Cenc have hogged the limelight, some other recent application approvals have gone unnoticed.

For instance, PA04308/04, proposing the development of basement parking and overlying dwellings at a site off Triq il-Knisja, Marsascala, was approved on July 30, even though the directorate recommended refusal. Although the site lies within the scheme, it is one of the few pristine uncommitted sites within the old part of Marsascala - the MEPA board approved the application after trivial concerns (regarding height limitations) were addressed following steady lobbying by the Marsascala business community.

In addition, plans for the building of the St Michael's Foundation secondary school in an ODZ area at Tal-Balal in San Gwann were approved on August 7, despite an increase in the earmarked footprint over previously submitted plans. This column had predicted the inevitable sprawling of the school premises in the ODZ location well beyond its current precincts when the first development on site was approved some years back.

Contrary to the strong resistance of environmentalists and farmers the first time round, this second application sailed through with hardly a murmur. It seems we are too busy to notice that supposedly untouchable ODZ areas around us are inexorably being eaten away on the excuse that it's all for "social or educational purposes". With diminishing religious vocations and the upsurge in the development of monasteries, it is a fitting sequel to call for more schools to be built despite a declining birth rate - where is the long-term feasibility in all this? Will any of the proponents of these developments admit their mistake when we end up with redundant school facilities and classes catering for just five pupils?

I am curious to know the updated statistics concerning the rate of loss of agricultural land in this country.

Silver linings

Nadur cemetery decision - The Gozo courts have upheld an application filed by 12 farmers and provisionally prohibited the archpriest of Nadur from carrying on with the development of a new cemetery at Ghajn Qasab. The Nadur parish has been given five days to reply to the technical report presented by the farmers in support of their concerns.

Besides the hydrological concerns, which may or may not be substantiated, the development of a cemetery in an ODZ area of High Landscape Value is objectionable, to say the least, especially since the project does not only have a social aspect, as claimed by the parish, but will generate hefty sums of money, and since the same parish had ample opportunity to extend the existing Nadur cemetery in the past.

Call for less waste of paper - This column is four-square behind Dr Paul Pace and all those participating in the EkoSkola project who have called for a stop to mailshots by our political class to address the waste problem and to save more trees. Most people simply throw this printed matter away (and rightly so, since they do not show any form of tangible commitment by politicians) and hence politicians should simply refrain from sending such trivia. Another alternative - use recycled paper for your messages.

Go's pro-recycling stance - Go employees were recently urged to contribute towards a recycling campaign by handing in obsolete paper-based stationery. The initiative was a huge success as Go employees handed in huge amounts of 'old' stationery. Spurred by this success, Go will shortly move to the next phase of the recycling process and process two 20-foot containers filled with this material for recycling locally.