

## Trees in the way of development?



An application has been submitted to develop part of Villa Rosa gardens, St Julian's – is it a coincidence that scores of mature Aleppo pine trees in the garden have turned brown in recent months?

A few weeks ago the media reported the untimely death of three mature trees in the precincts of Villa Rosa garden. Under normal circumstances, such an event would not raise many eyebrows, especially as many put environmental issues on the backburner during summer.

However, it so happens that these are not 'normal circumstances' for the area in question, as an application has been submitted to develop the gardens. The application proposes to encroach on the garden's lower level to develop 7,500 square metres of new commercial space, besides removing the three-metre-wide boundary wall and pedestrianising the back-beach area at St George's Bay.

Trees that are considered as spokes in the wheels of development have been known to face the gauntlet surreptitiously, through a slow but steady onslaught. Besides the three trees in question, the normally dark green foliage of a number of other mature Aleppo pine trees has started to turn brown, possibly indicating the imminent future death of more mature trees in the garden.

In the absence of cast iron evidence, one obviously cannot conclusively tie the tree deaths with the proposed development, and the above is nothing other than speculation. However, one hopes that any authorised development on site does not come at the expense of this green lung, which is such a rarity in this part of the island covered by an unforgiving concrete blanket.

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The developers should, from this point onwards, be bound by the authorities through onerous (not token) bank guarantees against any further mature tree deaths, despite being at the very early stages of the development application being considered.

### Still reeling from 2006

Reams upon reams have been written about the collective lunacy back in 2006 known by the unassuming term of 'scheme rationalisation', which eventually resulted in the development boundaries of the Maltese islands being extended. Yet nothing written can substitute the sobering view of seeing construction equipment move in on fields that were previously an Outside Development Zone, also referred to as a 'green area', as a result of this delirium.

Although people opposed to the further uglification of Malta at numerous sites around the islands may have experienced such a trauma this does not lessen the trauma they feel with every new ODZ encroached upon. So when it was the turn of the Tal-Mirakli area in Attard for the umpteenth scourge, residents and members of the public in general (at least, those with a

modicum of love for the country) were understandably up in arms, especially as the development is seen as further bridging the undeveloped area between Mosta and Attard (the so-called 'strategic open gap' in the jargon used by planners).

The case officer's report refers to a lone objection received from a resident in the area on the grounds that the site was an ODZ. One can only imagine the resident's disillusionment when he got to know that no site, even if it lies just a stone's throw away from the Tal-Mirakli chapel and on the other side of the boundary road, is too sacred for governments or developers in Malta.

The report tries to sugar the pill by stating, as one of the permit conditions, that the development, consisting of basement garages, residential units at three levels and at penthouse level, should have a water cistern to collect rainwater run-off, in line with the Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations (2012). Scant solace indeed, especially considering that Malta already has an estimated 75,000 vacant buildings, such residential development is completely unnecessary.

The present government has a golden opportunity in the upcoming exercise leading to the revision of the local plans – that of not emulating the lunacy of 2006. No calls from construction tycoons or individuals to include further ODZ plots of land in the development boundaries should be entertained, and the identity of people making such requests and the names of their architects should be published.

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## **Common sense finally prevails?**

The protracted 14-year-long saga concerning the proposed development of one the last undeveloped coastal stretches of St Paul's Bay (at Triq it-Tonn, close to the Dejma Tower in the Għar Għasfur area) seems to have finally ended, with the resolute stand taken by residents against development in this coastal ODZ finally paying dividends.

In fact, no appeal was submitted within the 30-day period stipulated by law, against the decision by the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal to refuse the first appeal and uphold the original refusal of the application.

## **Why do we bother to treat sewage?**

A stunning photo taken at a depth of approximately 65m by technical diver Matthew Montebello of the treated sewage outfall at Ras il-Hobz in Gozo and posted on the social media has elicited more than its fair share of comments by the public, which in turn nudged the Water Services Corporation (WSC) to issue a formal press release.

In the press release, the WSC rebutted claims that raw sewage was still spewing from the Ras il-Hobz discharge point due to some malfunction of the sewage treatment plant on site. It claimed that what the photo was actually depicting was a plume of treated sewage with a lower salinity (and, consequently, lower density) and not of raw sewage. Since I am unable to test the water quality at the site, I will take the WSC's word for it.

However, what boggles the mind is that, in the same press release, the WSC asked the public not to dive (and presumably, not to swim either) in the area. So one is justified to ask: Why bother to treat sewage, at the cost of over €7 million euros (the price tag of the Ras il-Hobz sewage treatment plant), €3 million of which were funded by the EU, if we still cannot dive in the area, which has become a popular diving site in recent years?

The popularity of the Ras il-Hobz dive site is such that it is regularly advertised online with divers (for example, [www.wannadive.net/spot/Europe/Malta/Gozo\\_Island/Ras\\_il-Hobz](http://www.wannadive.net/spot/Europe/Malta/Gozo_Island/Ras_il-Hobz)).

In addition, no less than three wrecks – the MV Karwela, Cominoland and the Xlendi, are located just a couple of hundred metres away from the Ras il-Hobz outfall, towards Xatt I-Aħmar. Just imagine the repercussions on the Gozitan diving industry if divers were to comply with the WSC's advice.

Other questions also beckon... is it safe to swim or dive at Anchor Bay, being close to the Iċ-Ċumnija sewage treatment plant? And what about at the Marsascala-Xgħajra coastline, being downwind of the Ta' Barkat outfall?