

Golfing - awaiting the Appeals Board decision



The development rat race at Xemxija knows no bounds, with eyesore apartment blocks in a frantic scramble to encroach the vantage points, with carob trees and pockets of vegetation being hemmed in. What was once a quaint little cossetting of seaside houses has been allowed to mushroom into an eyesore. With tourism on the downturn and so many apartment blocks already, why has the Xemxija Bay Hotel applied for an extension? Its position is too close to the nearby Simar reserve for comfort.

I deplore Dr Simon Tortell's behaviour at the recent golf course hearing. He treated all those present to a farce reminiscent of some rancid court proceedings, raising the ire of any sound-minded person.

When summoned to make his case, he asked to be seated at the Mepa Board table, something which protocol should have strictly forbidden. Then he embarked on a number of blood-curdling statements, namely (I paraphrase) that the development of a golf course at Verdala would be protecting the site from urbanisation.

So now we need mega projects to protect our scant land resources from the developer's axe?

In the much publicised incident involving Stephen Cachia of AD, Dr Tortell opted to quote from a letter without actually stating the date of inception of this letter - most probably since the letter was dated 1997 (i.e., prior to the compilation of the golf course EIA).

In addition, the letter supposedly expounded the pro-golfing opinion of an Agriculture Department stalwart, with the same department today clearly stating its negative opinion on the project after having perused the EIA.

Dr Tortell also sought to mislead those present by claiming that the two major impacts of the project were those on the landscape amenity and the loss of agricultural land - he outrageously believes that the impact on water resources (especially groundwater) and on the ecology of the site and of the islands as a whole (especially through the alien turf species) are negligible, bypassing all the EIA consultants in one deft statement.

The EIA commissioned by the same developer states that the merging of terraces would lead to a decrease in the intricacy of the landscape, which was considered to be a "major significant impact".

The EIA also states: "There are no other comparable examples of escarpment landscapes in Malta." It would indeed be salutary of pro-golfing acolytes if they were to quote from this EIA in their lackey statements.

The applicant, Anglu Xuereb, felt aggrieved at the end of the day and claimed that his part was allotted too little time to make his case. This could not be further from the truth - Dr Tortell was allotted slightly more than 30 minutes (while others making an intervention were allotted just three minutes).

The majority of his acolytes present, unlike the more verbose FKGK members, opted not to intervene out of their own free will. This could have been a blessing in disguise for the applicant, however, since one of those present (claiming to be a lecturer in agriculture at University) even claimed that cultivating turf grass for golfing can be considered as being a form of agriculture since it is effected for the benefit of man!

This is a fringe concept consigned to the back burner by mainstream agricultural gurus.

During the risible three minutes that I was allotted, I personally addressed Dr Tortell and asked him to counter the following: an advert for the site promoted the Verdala Hotel for its "typical Maltese landscape changing beautifully with the seasons, with the horizon in the background all

along the view. A real work of art sculptured by nature" while the golf course is promoting a dull monoculture all year round.

Predictably, Dr Tortell failed to rebut my statement.

Others present on the side of the applicant, like exponents from the Royal Malta Golf Club and the GRTU, revealed quite a simplistic opinion of what the environment is by claiming that golf courses safeguard the environment by not generating any waste, etc. - the pity was that no screening of those wishing to intervene was made before the meeting.

A sliver of suggestion to Mepa would be to position its presentation screen in the middle of the room to avail all those present of its services, rather than obscuring it for a good quarter of the room.

The PM has now "instructed" Mepa to shortlist a number of sites amenable for a golf course development. Do we need golf courses to entice tourists? After all, we can boast of the oldest free-standing temples in the world and over a million tourists.

In our insatiable drive to promote tourism, we fail to realise that Malta already has the highest tourism density in the world. I refer golfing enthusiasts to the following quote: "I recall discussing at the time of the formulation of the draft structure plan with a consultant from the firm Howarth & Howarth, who were involved in drawing up a tourism plan, who strongly believed that Malta should realise the potential of its valuable heritage rather than take up new uses which require vast amounts of land." (Dr Godwin Cassar, director general, Mepa, The Times, February 18, 2004)

It is indeed ironic that, although the golf course advocates highlight the benefits to tourism from such a project, no one hailing from the tourism sector deemed it worthwhile to be present at the Mepa meeting to expound his/her views.

Hotel extensions

The Tourism Ministry said that there were 16 new hotel or extension projects which expected to come on stream next year. These projects included three five-star hotels, increasing bed capacity by 412 beds, 11 four-star hotels increasing capacity by 2,012 beds and two three-star hotels, providing an additional 130 beds.

So that's where the lamenting all comes from. We first saturate the market with beds, then we are not able to fill them, as shown by dismal occupancy rates.

Next we ask government to conjure a golf course somewhere to offset the losses. Putting all your eggs in the volatile tourism market is risky, but we seem oblivious to this.

The deluge continues

Nature Trust (Malta) objected to 11 development applications published on August 28. These include applications for new developments or sanctionings in valleys, like Wied Qannotta and Wied Baqqiegħa, in parts of Gozo, like Sannat and Kercem, and in former hamlets like Bahrija.

The vast majority of these are ODZ applications. All credit goes to dedicated people, like Annalise Falzon, who take the time to rummage painstakingly through volumes of applications and send in objections.

Salina works

Application No. 03970/04 refers to the maintenance dredging (cleaning) of existing, blocked and silted up stormwater channel at is-Salini watercourse, l/o St Paul's Bay.

While the target date for this application was set as February 7, 2005, works at the ecologically sensitive site have long started - over six months before any decision has been taken.

Heavy machinery is ostensibly being used on site to remove seagrass debris. One wonders if anyone from the Nature Protection Unit (NPU) of Mepa was present throughout the proceedings due to the ecological value of the last remaining real salt marsh in our islands.

While one concedes that stormwater protection should be afforded, this should not come at the expense of sensitive sites, like Wied il-Kbir in Qormi and is-Salina.

All proceedings should be monitored by the competent authorities to bridle uncouth government/contractor employees, and heavy machinery use should be avoided as much as possible.