

## OPINION&amp;LETTERS



Bidnija swap site: An application to develop four residential units within this ODZ site in Bidnija has been submitted, proposing in return the closure of a pig farm in an ODZ area in Żebbuġ.

# An unusual barter proposal



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**T**he shenanigans that development applicants continuously churn out defy credulity sometimes. It seems, in fact, that the higher the odds stacked against them to obtain a planning permit for an ODZ area, the quirkier the shenanigan resorted to by the applicant.

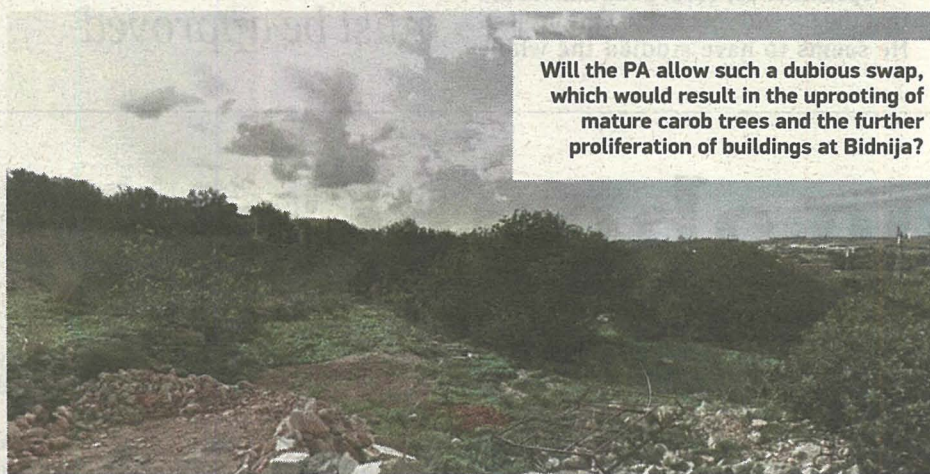
For instance, PA 07052/18 is proposing the construction of four residences along Triq il-Bidwi, in an ODZ area in Bidnija, in compensation for the closure of a pig farm in a valley in Żebbuġ (Malta).

At face value, the Latin term *quid pro quo*, which would roughly translate in the pedestrian “tit for tat”, springs to mind, especially since the applicant is proposing the reinstatement of a currently impacted site, including the demolition of a two-storey pig farm and the removal of the underlying cesspits in order to rewind backwards the clock and convert the site back into terraced, arable fields.

But upon some thought one realises that what is being proposed is hardly an equitable exchange, besides setting a dangerous precedent for further dubious ODZ land swaps. For instance, the proposed construction of four new residences at the Bidnija site will entail the demolition of a stretch of rubble walls besides the uprooting of mature trees.

In addition, the proposal, as rightly underscored within an objection submitted by the eNGO Flimkien Għall-Ambjent Aħjar (FAA), goes counter to a number of SPED (Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development) policies, especially specific rural objectives which had been formulated to militate against the proliferation of residential development within rural communities.

The Central Malta Local Plan (CMLP) specifically designates Bidnija, along with Magħtab, as a Category 2 Rural Settlement, which “should be conserved, consolidated



Will the PA allow such a dubious swap, which would result in the uprooting of mature carob trees and the further proliferation of buildings at Bidnija?

and rehabilitated whilst retaining their rural character”. I wonder how the proposed development of four residential units within an ODZ area in Bidnija will help to retain the rural character of the area.

The CMLP also has a number of provisions about mature trees located within such rural settlements, namely: “Given that mature trees constitute important components of natural and semi-natural ecosystems and are also important aesthetic features of our rural landscape and within rural settlements, these will be protected.” The site at Bidnija holds at least

four mature trees and is largely flanked by agricultural land.

One further consideration to make is the pledged reinstatement of the Żebbuġ pig farm site, about which a number of misgivings should be expressed given our national track record in ‘reinstating sites to their previous status’ and the enforceability of such a pledge, which leaves our planning authorities at the mercy of the applicant once the Bidnija development permit is issued.

The veritable can of worms that the approval of such an application would open is enriched is even further when one considers a future scenario whereby the Żebbuġ ‘reinstated’ site is once again proposed for development on the grounds that this was a previously occupied site, yet another foible of some of our resourceful architects, thus obliterating any environmental gain that the original land swap might have resulted in.

From a planning point of view, this application also represents a conundrum since it proposes the coalescence of two disparate sites within a single proposal, raising eyebrows about the permissibility, according to the current planning framework, of such an approach.

Despite the numerous policy safeguards against the proposed development in Bidnija, it is sobering to note that residential development within Category 2 Rural Developments, such as Bidnija, has been previously

permitted at planning commission stage or at appeals (EPRT) stage, after being originally refuted. This on the grounds that the revised ODZ policies (the infamous Rural Policy and Design Guidelines), ushered through in 2014, supersede any conflicting provisions concerning Categories 1, 2 and 3 of rural settlements enshrined within local plans and even within the SPED.

As a result, residential development within hamlets on the outskirts of villages such as Mgarr and Dingli has been waved through.

The deadline for submitting representations is October 12. The decision on the application is slated for January 2019.

## The Switzerland of the Mediterranean? Hardly....

When it comes to the national status enjoyed by cycling, Switzerland and Malta are poles apart. In fact, within the same week that local cyclists participating in the National Bike Ride were reported as expressing their consternation about the perils of cycling on Maltese roads, the Swiss, through a three-quarters majority, approved in a referendum the entrenching of cycling with their constitution.

Such an entrenchment literally puts cycling on a par with driving and hiking, which are already listed in the Swiss Constitution, and effectively means that the federal roads office in Switzerland (FEDRO) can establish national standards for the development of cycling lanes and should give a higher priority to these lanes when designing new roads.

The contrast with the situation in Malta could not be more stark...and this despite the fact that fatalities on the road among the cycling community in Switzerland continue to rise. This does not seem to have dampened the popularity of cycling in the Alpine state. In fact, although in 2017 alone, accidents involving cyclists in Switzerland resulted in 40 fatalities and 4,200 injuries amongst the cycling community, two-thirds of households in Switzerland have at least one bicycle.

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