

Putting eco-Gozo to the test



A gravel pathway smothers what was once garigue. Mepa's enforcement section has asked the perpetrator to remove it but how will ecological restoration be achieved?

With plans for eco-Gozo supposedly in place, a number of planning and enforcement cases are posing a litmus test for the green scheme. The convoluted nature of the cases, arising from the many plays resorted to by some Gozitan developers, make it almost impossible to stick to the principles of eco-Gozo. The following are three such cases:

Għarb ODZ development

The village of Għarb is constantly bearing the brunt of audacious planning applications for sites within or verging on Outside Development Zone (ODZ). A case in point is PA5771/07, originally refused on April 21, 2008, and now up for reconsideration, with the case having been deferred last week for a later hearing.

This planning application is somewhat more brazen than others. Most of the site in question is ODZ in nature, located on the edge of the limits for development at the northwest of Għarb, on the way to San Dimitri, with only a small sliver of the development lying within scheme.

Moreover, the existing property abutting the proposed development was approved in 1999 subject to a number of conditions, including the inclusion of a side garden facing the ODZ, thus eliminating the blank party wall from the area overlooking the ODZ in order to bar any further development in this direction. If the proposed development is given the green light, this would make a mockery of this provision.

The case officer appointed to the case had diligently highlighted four reasons why he recommended refusal.

Firstly, only 27m² of the site falls within scheme and hence it could not be developed. Secondly, there was no justification to allow such development since it did not belong to any of the categories approved for ODZ development. Thirdly, the development would disturb the skyline and also impinge negatively on the existing rural character of the area. And fourthly, even if the proposal was amended the assessment would remain the same, further illustrating the proposal's objectionable nature. One hopes the same reasons prevail on case reconsideration day.

Opponents claim that the site notice for the proposed development was affixed on site for just a few hours, just enough to take the mandatory photo of the notice, rather than the prescribed two weeks.

The opponents have a feeling of dread over the application in view of the fact that the applicant's lawyer happens to be married to the chairman of the DCC A board, who rightly declared her indirect conflict of interest in the case and left the room during the vote the first time round.

Għajnsielem valley encroachment

Last November I had reported about encroachment in a valley in Għajnsielem, skirting Triq Borg Għarib and Triq Smirat, whereby the construction of dwellings and garages led to the construction of a makeshift concrete platform/ramp protruding into the valley.

The concrete platform, officially intended to allow crane operations on site, remained after construction works were completed and was serving as an impromptu secondary access road to the newly-built dwellings. Following the issue of an enforcement notice the Lands Department intervened to remove the platform and expose the original retaining wall on site.

One year on, more construction debris has been dumped on the side of the valley in what appears to be a further attempt to widen the access road to the dwellings, at the expense of the valley.

Rumours are rife that, eventually, windows on the dwellings' lower levels will be replaced with garage doors, even though the permit issued for application PA 03603/03 stated unequivocally that no access from the lower level would be permitted.

The rub in it all is that the illegal road widening works were conducted at the behest of the Gozo Ministry's Projects and Development Department.

Carob-cutting cases

In June 2008, an application was submitted to sanction the cutting down of two carob trees at a site in Qala's urban conservation area.

The applicant had decided to cut down the trees and then, in what has become common practice, apply for sanctioning. While the applicant could possibly have to pay a fine he would still have cleared the site of possible hindrances to development.

The sanctioning was not approved and in the absence of such sanctioning, the applicant has resubmitted a second bid since his plans for a dwelling and swimming pool on site cannot even be considered.

Another Gozitan application for the sanctioning of carob tree felling is also pending, this time at a site in Xagħra.

Attard quarry update

Attard residents have sought to limit quarrying activities at Wied Inċita and the clouds of fine dust bellowing from the quarry, due to its impact.

A number of meetings have been held between Mepa, Attard council and the residents association. Other meetings were held with the quarry owner. Subsequently, Mepa board members and Attard councillors carried out a site visit.

All parties agreed to hold meetings, chaired by Attard council architect Stephen Farrugia to try to find an acceptable way forward. Mepa has appointed its representatives to these meetings. Meetings are still in progress and a plan of action should be concluded by the end of this month. One hopes that such good intentions don't get bogged down in dithering and that concrete action is embarked upon.