

More industrial zones



Profiting from the brief respite in inclement weather, some individuals duly transported some concrete blocks to rebuild a boathouse at Gnejna in broad daylight without anyone batting an eyelid. Boathouses are likewise mushrooming at St Thomas Bay without anyone taking any concrete action. Will MEPA move in on this Gnejna site? No expedient, such that the boathouse has been constructed prior to 1992, applies here.

MEPA's official numbers state that our industrial zones constitute five million square metres of land, or two per cent of our surface area. Such a statistic must surely place us among the upper European echelons of industrial land use.

Despite this, and despite our limited surface area, the Parliamentary Secretary for Small Business and the Self-Employed, Edwin Vassallo, announced recently that Parliament will soon requisition the placing within development zones of seven zones around the islands, totalling more than 85 tumoli of land, for the development of micro-enterprise parks.

The earmarked zones girdle the islands, from Naxxar (t'Alla w Ommu), to Ghaxaq, Zabbar, Mosta, Mellieha, Mgarr and Gozo (Ghajnsielem). Some of the sites chosen abut on ecologically important sites like the t'Alla w Ommu in Naxxar, close to the Wied l-Ghasel valley restoration project area and peppered on its perimeter with karstic rock pools.

Eighty-five tumoli might not seem that much but the same secretariat had originally aimed for 200 tumoli (as originally announced on August 4, 2004, during the presentation of its business plan) but a fortunate concoction of different reasons proved to be a spanner in the works.

In fact, some of the land originally earmarked is currently under the Joint Office since it previously belonged to the Church and to date no legal means to encroach on this land have been found.

Yet more numerical jargon will make us realise that this development is contrary to all tenets of sustainability that we should be embracing. MEPA states that 51 per cent of the land within industrial zones in private ownership is not developed. So, why can't the proposed micro-enterprises be sited within these zones?

Maybe because operators of these enterprises want to be sited just a few minutes' drive away from their homes? Are industrial zones not congenial to their needs? Due to the whims of these operators, who constantly complain about lack of industrial space in our islands, 85 more tumoli of land are going down the drain.

The secretariat is claiming that it is acting in the interests of the residents by moving such small enterprises out of residential areas. Sixty-three per cent of these micro-enterprises are located within residential areas (SoE Report, 2002).

Hence, since this is a significant percentage, are we to assume that once this venture goes ahead our residential areas will be replete with new ex-industrial sites to convert into housing plots? Or, predictably, once the former tenants move into the newly developed areas, the former industrial sites will be left vacant, adding further to the vacant property and urbanisation mills.

The same secretariat claims that the land earmarked for development bears no propensity for any other alternative use. What guarantee will there be that such zones will not be allowed to mushroom in the future?

Rather than seeking assurances from the applicants that they will be using the sites for industrial purposes only, the secretariat should collect guarantee money to provide against wanton environmental degradation or illegal adjacent building.

The triumphant tone with which the secretariat announced that it was the first time that Parliament had been asked to requisition land from outside development zones is certainly sobering since a dangerous precedent could be in the making.

Ramble on

Now that the die has been cast and Malta's first Rambler's Association has been moulded in stone, a few lines from Led Zeppelin's Ramble On are more than appropriate under the circumstances:

"Ramble on,

And now's the time, the time is now

To sing my song

I'm goin' 'round the world..."

An accolade should go to Castelain after so much bickering on previous issues, like the golf course. In the Commentary in last Sunday's Gozo Newsletter, Castelain rightly laments the indiscriminate squatting over Gozo's public trails, as in the Qala, Ta' Sarraflu and Ras il-Wardija environs, and that the swansong should be sung for the impromptu Riservato signs dotting our countryside.

We do not need any more roads

John Galea from Marsalforn in his letter "Xemxija bridge" last Sunday clamours for a bridge to be built over Xemxija and Mizieb valleys to alleviate traffic congestion problems as a result of inter-island movement.

Although what is being proposed is doubtlessly a white elephant which will never materialise in today's cash-strapped country, Mr Galea's letter is symptomatic of a growing culture where the public is asking for more roads to be constructed without actually knowing the hard facts.

MEPA's Structure Plan Review (SPR) exercise states that inter-island traffic accounts for just 0.2% of all domestic traffic and that 800 tumoli of land have already gone down the drain in misconceived road projects.

Having lifted the lid on the argument, I sometimes get the impression that the rabid dog of road construction is kept going by our authorities simply to bolster the workload of local contractors, whose political clout is significant, and to use EU regional financial help towards road construction as a political battle cry.

The EU should place the onus on feasibility studies prior to meting out the dole to actually investigate whether a need exists for so many mammoth projects and that more money is channelled towards the environmental monitoring of such projects.

Yet more road projects on the cards include the Pwales Valley tunnel and a widening of the Coast Road. With the hindsight of the environmental degradation of ongoing road projects at Mgarr, Mosta, etc., shudders pass through my spine when I envisage what would happen to Pwales Valley if such a project were to be given the green light, with mounds of rubble spilling on to adjacent agricultural land.

I refer proponents of mega road projects to a vintage letter by Joseph Pirota - Environmental Sustainability (The Times, February 26) in which he rightly elucidates that sustainability does not entail only improvements in waste management but also tackling air and noise pollution and urbanisation problems.

He goes on to elaborate on the damage wrought by the new Birguma bypass on the environs and the planned extension passing through I-Ghaqba Valley to end up at is-Sghajtar.

To divulge such statistics and to avoid reports becoming simply another academic exercise which are shelved after some time, MEPA officials should expend more time in public relations.

Solving flooding problems

Despite the much-vaunted recent floodwater mitigation works at Qormi and Marsa, Qormi residents (who duly formed the Uljed Hal Qormi lobby group) are complaining of flooding problems ever since the Mriehel bypass was opened.

This further dents the widespread belief that human engineering works, rather than proper planning practices (such as not developing valleys), can solve flooding problems.

More 'green' blushes for our country

Despite all the maquillage by our authorities, not all is right when it comes to Malta's green credentials. In fact, in an article by Ivan Camilleri, it was recently announced that the EU is to begin infringement procedures against Malta and eight other EU states for not transposing a directive, catering for the public's right to access information on the environment by providing within a month all the information requested, in their national law codes.

The MRAE's position on this is that a draft legal notice is being prepared and will be published "in the near future" ...when it comes to green matters, the 11th hour is the prerogative for our country, it seems.

Yet another source for blushes is certainly the recent meeting of all the world's environment ministers at UNEP's (UN Environmental Programme) Ministerial Forum and General Council in Nairobi, where Malta was conspicuous by its absence, since neither the Minister for the Environment nor the Ambassador for Environmental Affairs attended.

Tight-lipped MEPA

Despite all the soliciting, MEPA is still tight-lipped on the outcome of its 'enforcement' (direct action? - I tend to get befuddled with the many obsolete terms) at Imgiebah. Almost eight months have already elapsed since the case started. What can budge MEPA?

The farce at Dingli continues

After the previous two carte blanches acceded to by MEPA's DCC at Triq it-Turretta in Dingli, which effectively sanctioned the plush conversion of military barracks into villas with pools, a third hopeful applicant submitted a similar application (PA 07226/04) for an adjacent barrack site, being represented by the same firm of architects that won the day for the previous two applicants. And the rot festers further.

Silver linings

The Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) was ratified by the European Union on February 17.

The convention is the world's most far-reaching treaty on environmental rights. It seeks to promote greater transparency and accountability among government bodies by guaranteeing public rights of access to environmental information, providing for public involvement in environmental decision making and requiring the establishment of procedures enabling the public to challenge environmental decisions. It comes into force in every member country 90 days after ratification.

The EU also approved new ship pollution rules which are much more stringent than previous ones since, among other measures, they criminalise accidental pollution incidents.

Such rules are of the essence to the Mediterranean Sea, which bears the brunt of at least 30 per cent of the global oil traffic. Despite this, however, our country, together with Cyprus and Greece, engaged in last-minute pillorying to amend the new rules, all to no avail.

Smart Supermarket deserves the green silver spoon for actively helping to mitigate the plastic waste problem in this country by importing a substantial number of cloth bags and selling them at a subsidised price to its customers. One augurs that the cue is taken up by other market outlets.

MEPA deserves some praise amid all the gloom for the latest two services it launched recently - MyPlanning and Mobileplus - for a more efficient customer application-tracking service.

Environment Minister George Pullicino stated that Mepa and the Management Efficiency Unit were carrying out an audit on the efficiency of application processes, applications and the quality of the case officer reports. We will all be waiting eagerly in the wings to glean the details of these audits.