

## The best use for 'disused land'



The extensive levelling of land conducted at Ghajn Żejtuna without permit is a hallmark of the comprehensive coastal encroachment on site.

A particular Outside Development Zone application submitted last June caught my eye in view of the paternalistic way in which it sweetens what is essentially development on virgin land.

PA 07315/07 proposed the construction of garages for large vehicles and ancillary offices on disused land, along Triq Duramblat in Mosta.

While farmers in the UK and elsewhere in Europe are paid to maintain their plots in a natural state and not embark in any farming activity, local developers justify their ODZ proposals by denigrating the land in question.

This is typical of the rampant Mediterranean perception that land in its natural state is essentially 'wasteland' - unfortunately, such warped rationale is most prevalent in farming communities locally and especially in Gozo.

Should we convert all swathes of garigue and other natural habitat to farmland from now on to avert developers setting their eyes on such land?

The steady flow of ODZ applications submitted during June and July was consonant with the over-100 per month mark set in recent years. In fact, a total of 118 and 108 ODZ applications were submitted respectively during June and July.

Of these, 11 and eight applications proposed completely new developments on uncommitted land. Some well-oiled trends emerge from an analysis of the monthly dose of ODZ applications.

The lion's share of proposed developments on ODZ land related to sites in Gozo, especially in Xagħra, Kerċem, Qala, Għarb and Xewkija. In fact 10 of the 19 proposed developments on uncommitted land proposed houses with pools, flats and garages, dwellings with garages, terraced houses and even a supermarket.

Mgarr, Bidnija, Rabat, Dingli and St Thomas Bay seem to be very appealing to those seeking to develop ODZ.

Besides the white-hot demand for ODZ residential buildings, uncommitted land is also earmarked for the construction of warehouses at Tal-Ħandaq, Qormi, garages for coaches in Żejtun, and blocks of six maisonettes in Rabat.

Despite the fact that the agricultural sector in our islands is not recruiting significant manpower, the proposals for new pumping rooms, tool sheds, greenhouses, agricultural rooms, reservoirs and the lot continues at a feverish pace.

### More coastal encroachment

Despite the coastal stretch at Ghajn Żejtuna having been ruined beyond recognition ever since the 1970s after becoming a veritable annex to Mellieħa Bay, there seems to be no sign of abatement in sight. We still see roughshod sediment removal and levelling works, besides the

deposit of concrete, having created a de facto clearing for tent structures and parking of cars, just a stone's throw away from the shingle/cobble beach on site.

An enforcement notice for the removal of material, levelling and concreting the land, and formation of terraces and road was promptly issued, but it has simply joined the 250 pending enforcement notices for the locality of Mellieħa alone. Who will ensure that the site is reinstated to its former condition?

No one seems to be able to unravel the current Catch 22 situation where Mepa enforcement staff rightly complain about being over-stretched, that pending enforcement notices are issued but remain perennially in limbo and rarely acted upon since they are superseded by sanctioning applications.

## **Is Comino next?**

James Debono's article in MaltaToday last Sunday - 'From Comino to the Isle of Man' - opens up a can of worms and is bound to concern all those who cherish unspoilt and untamed Comino.

Extensions of the only hotel on the island have been touted ever since it was developed and therefore such rumours are normally treated with a pinch of salt.

However, this time, things seem to be different, with some top entrepreneurs swooping over the hotel's ownership.

One hopes that the seemingly defunct committee to manage Comino some years back can successfully fend off any extension of hotel facilities on the island. The sight of even more tennis courts amid lush garigue, idle for most of the day in summer and not frequented in winter, is a capricious thought, to say the least.

## **Gozo airstrip considerations**

I have received countless e-mails protesting against this column's anti-Gozo airstrip proposal. Such e-mails were mainly written by foreign residents in Gozo.

I would not like to discriminate against any group of individuals but I doubt whether the lobby of foreign retirees clamouring for a shorter transit time to cross over to Malta should be considered on an even par with the hordes of tourists who would like to see Gozo retaining its image.

We also have to take into consideration the Gozitans who visit Malta every day for work purposes and who are not complaining about the service offered by the ferry.

The Mediterranean is replete with small islands not serviced by air and which retain their allure for this very reason. Take the Pelagian Islands. Lampedusa is serviced by air since it's far from mainland Europe, but its sister island Linosa is accessible only by ferry.

This penchant for air travel to every cranny of the world is a fad and costly environmentally, to say the least. Airstrip proponents say that such an airstrip is not ecologically unsound - relatively large developments like airstrips are bogged down by the fact that they guzzle hectares of land.

There's no escaping the footprint aspect. By the way, the figures for the number of vehicles and passengers crossing over to Gozo during the Santa Marija bonanza are out - hardly sobering at all. What are Gozo tourism operators complaining about?