

Some applicants have no shame



After construction debris dumped at this site in Żebbiegħ was highlighted in this column and a Mepa enforcement notice went unheeded, the authority threatened to take direct action, after which the perpetrator started clearing the rubble.

The time-honoured script has been well-rehearsed over successive general elections and is set to be played out this time round too.

It dictates that the most controversial planning applications in Outside Development Zones (ODZ) are submitted on the eve of an election, pinning their hopes on the frenetic jostling and horse-trading that invariably takes place prior to D-Day.

A decision is due in February, possibly on the eve of a general election. Coincidence? Perhaps

- Alan Deidun

Away from the antics being played out in Parliament, the building onslaught in Kalkara is very much alive and kicking. The media hype it had attracted a few years ago seems to have receded back into oblivion.

In particular, an ODZ site along Triq Santu Rokku in one of Malta's few remaining rural hamlets – Santu Rokku in Kalkara – has been targeted by applicants, who have submitted three successive applications over the past three-and-a-half years.

PA 01509/09 was submitted in April 2009 to build a terraced house and basement garage.

The application, along with its reconsideration (PA 01510/09), which were opposed by Nature Trust and Moviment Graffiti, were rejected by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority on solid grounds spelled out in the case officer's report.

The report diligently explained why development should not be permitted in the area, first and foremost because it would prejudice the rural character of the hamlet, in so doing going against the Grand Harbour local plan's objectives, by proposing the urbanisation of the countryside.

Secondly, because the proposed urban development is unjustified as it lies in a Rural Conservation Area. Third, the proposal conflicts with the soil conservation measures outlined in the Structure Plan as it will result in the unnecessary removal of soil cover.

Fourth, the proposed development conflicts with the aims of the Structure Plan that encourages development that does not encroach on the landscaped environment.

Fifth, the development would adversely affect the Area of Ecological Importance/Site of Scientific Importance in which it is located.

Sixth, the development would fail to conserve the environmental character of the valley in which it is located.

Lastly, the development would result in the demolition and alteration of a substantial length of rubble wall.

Faced with such a plethora of valid objections, the applicant and the architect in question should have had the presence of mind to desist from lobbying for the development of the site. This has not been the case, with a reconsideration being submitted and duly rejected by Mepa.

Notwithstanding this, a third application was submitted in August 2012.

Mepa's Natural Heritage Panel has already reiterated its objections, referring the applicant to the previous two applications for the same site. A decision is due in February, possibly on the eve of a general election.

Coincidence? Perhaps.

Mini-Magħtab being cleared

Through this column I had drawn attention to the big mounds of construction debris unceremoniously dumped in fields in Żebbiegħ, close to the hamlet's church, and Mepa subsequently issued an enforcement notice on the site last May. Efforts were made to track down the site's owner and Mepa recently warned that it would take direct action on site at the owner's expense.

This finally bore fruit as the owner is slowly but surely clearing the debris. One needs to monitor where the debris is being dumped now – hopefully, at a sanctioned site rather than a pristine spot.

Dumping of rubble and debris is common practice to pave the way either for land reclamation for agricultural purposes or, more ostensibly, for development by lowering its ecological and landscape value.

'Gigalopolises' on the cards

A recent edition of Scientific American makes sobering reading. By 2030 more than half the world's expected nine billion people will live in giant urban expanses (aptly dubbed 'gigalopolises') and cities and their hinterlands will triple in size occupying an additional 1.2 million square kilometres.

This means that urban areas that currently occupy roughly three per cent of the planet's surface will continue to expand and an additional 1.35 billion people will be living in cities.

By comparison, urban areas increased by just 58,000 square kilometres between 1970 and 2000.

Fifty-five per cent of that expansion came from massive urbanisation in India and China – a trend that has been growing in recent decades.

For example, a megalopolis similar to the urban corridor between Boston and Washington DC, in the US is likely to form between Hangzhou and Shenyang in China.

But the fastest urbanisation is predicted to occur in newly developing regions in Africa, such as the coast of West Africa along the Gulf of Guinea and the shores of Lake Victoria farther south, encompassing Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, among other regions.

In some cases, this may spell the destruction of the rich array of species to be found in the Eastern Afrotropical, Guinean forests of West Africa and Western Ghats of India, along with Sri Lanka, are all home to great biodiversity.

These areas are projected to undergo rapid urban expansion that will encroach on the territory of already endangered amphibians, birds and mammals.

The worst impacts of urban growth are projected to occur in Central and South America.