

MEPA golfing sites shortlist



The Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment should be lauded for enforcing a 70-year-old law safeguarding the pine forest at Pietà leading to Portes des Bombes by not renewing a licence for billboard advertisements, by highlighting illegal concrete platform constructions at Pietà and seeking to cordon off the area with a fence to prevent illegal parking

The curtain is finally down and Pandora's box has been opened with the long-awaited list of the five most amenable sites for golfing commissioned by the Prime Minister, Dr Lawrence Gonzi, being published by MEPA.

Sites which were initially considered with the rest but which eventually did not make the grade include the Ta' Zuta quarrying area, l/o Dingli and Siggiewi (discarded since MEPA estimates that there are still five years for the quarrying area to be exhausted, as it is surrounded by a myriad of protected sites and is largely inaccessible).

Others which were similarly discarded are the Maghtab area, due to a public outcry (it was dropped because of non-congenial slope gradients and the long timeframe needed to fully rehabilitate the area); the Mqabba quarry area (rejected due to ongoing quarrying activities in the area); two sites at Dwejra in San Lawrenz, Gozo (there is a wide range of ecologically important habitats found on site, such as valleys, garigue, rocky steppe and cliffs); Pembroke (refused for the same reasons as those which led to MEPA rejecting outright an application for the site in June 2002 - i.e., the area is scheduled as per GN 582/96 as an AEI and an SSI, it harbours a monument of historic importance and has army rifle ranges, among other important reasons); and Habel Bellu in Zebbug (rejected because of a perceived negative impact on groundwater reserves, its inaccessibility and the agricultural land on site).

At the end of the exercise, just five sites met the requirements:

- Ta' Cenc (Gozo) - report recommends that only a nine-hole golf course be permitted on site due to the ecological importance of the same site and due to the physical constraints of the terraces, even though applicant is claiming that an 18-hole golf course can be accommodated;
- Ghajn Mhelhel, l/o Zebbug (Gozo) - report states that area is generally degraded and bearing the brunt of bird trapping and abandoned agriculture, even though it harbours a sizable number of tamarisk trees and significant landscaping works would be needed;
- Extension to existing golf course at Marsa - an extra 46 ha have been identified in the report, which would bolster the existing area to that needed for a championship 18-hole golf course, even though some sports and recreational areas would have to be committed, while part of the area is scheduled for its geological importance;
- Tal-Gawhar (Safi) - this little known locality lies very close to the airport and this, together with the fact that a large part of it is made up of bird trapping sites and degraded land, was the main reason for its shortlisting. In fact, the report says that a golf course in such a locality could attract tourists to the south of the island. However, the area contains a number of irrigated fields and rubble walls; and
- White Rocks - the site has already been issued with a development permit (PA 810/01) referring to the development of a tourist complex on site and there is already a pending application (PA 5167/030) for demolition works to start. The area of 80 ha covers mostly degraded land, occupied by bird trappers and by a caravan site on the opposite site, although two full-time farmers till the fields on one side while the earmarked site overlaps part of the scheduled area (mainly with the buffer Level 3 area) at Pembroke. In addition, part of the escarpment running from Fomm ir-Rih to Madliena is also present, together with a Grade 1 building (Martin Luther King Hall).

One can now finally understand why Ta' Cenc was not included in the proposed Natura 2000 sites list presented to the EU earlier on.

The report by MEPA claims that the Mqabba quarries area is suitable for a golf course since there is no blatant obstacle to golfing on site, except a number of archaeological remains. However, the report did not shortlist the site because of the short deadline given by the Prime Minister for golf courses to be up and running since quarrying activities on site would cease in a matter of months or a few years. Hence, we are basically throwing a potentially good site on the backburner

All the sites shortlisted by the report will entail sacrificing some of our ecological, recreational, archaeological or geological assets - one only augurs that such assets top the list of priorities when it comes to decision-making, rather than simply the vicinity to existing tourist facilities.

Angelo Xuereb on November 18 officially appealed against the Verdala golf course decision. If the appeal is upheld, will the Verdala site still be considered with the other five shortlisted by MEPA?

Xemxija Posidonia - public perception

I thank Mr Mark Galea (The Sunday Times, November 14) for finding my stance against the Xemxija yacht marina amusing since I rather tend to find his letter quite disillusioning. In fact, his clamouring for a yacht marina in Xemxija and for other projects, such as the Barcelona-style aquarium in Qawra, depresses me since it mirrors the public perception of what the environment is vis-à-vis development.

I am sure that Mr Galea has no inkling of the ecological importance of Posidonia oceanica. In environmental science and biology, we teach our students that Posidonia is a key species, both when it is alive, since it mitigates erosion of the seabed, is a nursery for many fish species, and improves water transparency, among other things, and when it is beached, because it is important for sand accretion, for dune formation and is an important habitat in itself (with endemics even being reported from such beached 'banquettes').

Evidently, Mr Galea is oblivious to such scientific facts or is choosing to join the bandwagon of those calling for more ribbon development along our coasts. If Mr Galea and other proponents of the yacht marina at Xemxija had cared to check with MEPA, they would have learned that Posidonia meadows extend over the eastern half of the islands. Such a map already existed in 1995! As it happens, these facts were published in "The Green Whistleblower" of the same date, November 14. Incidentally, even MEPA in its Green Point daily spot and the Church's Green Commission took a pro-banquette stance.

But evidently, scientific advice is shunned in this country when it comes to decision-making with ministers bending to public pressure for white elephants, which are seen as solutions to our financial problems.

Two galling applications

Some welcome respite from outside development zone (ODZ) applications was supplied on October 30 with just two such applications being submitted. However, the nature of these applications is galling, to say the least.

One, 05216/04, refers to the proposed relocation and upgrading of existing facilities at the Kantra Seaside Beachclub at il-Kantra ta' Mgarr ix-Xini, Gozo. There is a thinly-veiled proposal to construct a swimming pool on site, despite the 'beachclub' lying in the middle of a scheduled area of ecological importance. The club belongs to the Hotel Ta' Cenc, which is now vying too for a golf course - why doesn't the hotel management apply to turn the entire western coast of Gozo into a new Algarve or Mallorca? Incidentally, the same beachclub site is peppered with recent plush constructions.

The second application, 05791/04, refers to the extension of the quarrying site at Ta' Zuta, l/o Dingli, to a depth of 180 mmsl. This is the quarry which rubs shoulders with the Ghar il-Kbir compound and also abuts on a myriad of ecologically sensitive areas on the cliffside.

MEPA replied to the dust cloud kicked up by Nature Trust regarding the chairman of the DCC Board applying, on behalf of his clients, for ODZ sites although the same board deliberates on ODZ site applications.

MEPA said that DCC board members are paid an honorarium, not a salary, and that all MEPA employees are governed by the code of ethics which applies to all public sector employees. Such a code precludes board members from taking part in deciding applications in which they are an interested party because of the obvious conflict of interest, but they are free to defend the case if it comes up for reconsideration.

One of the possible solutions to this hiatus is staring us in the face - why not pay DCC board members an adequate salary so that they are able to stop practising privately as architects? Are we to deduce from MEPA's statement that the architects on the DCC board are not acquainted with each other and that human relations do not play any part in a completely clinical decision-making environment?

ODZ applications should not be on the agenda of any MEPA board and that's the bottom line. 03808/04, referring to an ODZ site at New Street, off Triq Mulejja in Fontana, was recently rejected by MEPA - one can only hope that similar ODZ applications, including those submitted

by board members, at Wied il-Lunzjata and along Triq il-Marfa in Mellieha, will be thrown out too.

Silver linings

The Authorities in this country finally seem to have fallen in love with trees, because a number of pro-tree decisions have been taken. After the landmark Lm6,500 fine imposed on a man from Sliema for cutting down pine and olive trees older than 10 years, MEPA announced that it would be taking legal action against a major contractor, Polidano, for uprooting protected olive trees at Dawret San Pawl in Xemxija, despite three enforcement notices on site.

It is no secret that the environmental credentials of some contractors still need to take root, with their workers showing a complete disregard for trees or any other natural impediment in their way.

The Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment is also to be lauded for enforcing the Portes des Bombes Area Preservation Act passed in 1933 to protect the pine thicket in the Pietà/Valletta area by announcing a number of measures. These included the cordoning off of the pinetum with a boundary wall and prohibiting parking therein. In addition, the concrete encroachment close to the Pietà Bocci Club, now an impromptu boat cemetery, would be reserved for Transport Authority employees and the licence to place billboards would not be renewed. Trees were also being replanted in the area.

Green warden frenzy appears to have gripped the island, after years of inertia. Details over the future recruitment of such wardens are still murky, with hopes that such wardens will have some real clout, such as by empowering them to stop and identify people to mete out fines, putting them under the jurisdiction of the Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment, rather than under the Ministry of Justice and Local Councils, since some areas to be monitored fall under the central government, such as Buskett, and to avoid having some local councils deciding not to implement the service. Such proposals had already been forwarded by Nature Trust in April 2002!