

## Għarghur: inconsistent defence of ODZ areas



The Għarghur local council parades evocative photos of Wied id-Dis on its website but is then unable to take a stand against a massive extension of a fireworks factory within the same valley.

**Alan Deidun** outlines the case of the *St Bartholemew fireworks factory extension, approved literally on the eve of the last election, where conflicts of interest abound.*

The recent approval of a proposed massive extension to the Għarghur fireworks factory has rightly caused considerable angst on several fronts. The development will amount to 205 square metres above ground and five blast walls covering a further 150 square metres, leading to a total commitment of the entire area.

Firstly, the environmental concerns. They are succinctly condensed in the representation by the Environment Protection Directorate (now the ERA – Environmental Resources Authority), which describes the site as being located along the valley sides of Wied id-Dis, which are characterised by rich maquis vegetation, in particular mature Carob trees. The area is proposed for scheduling (level 2 AEI).

“The proposed requirements including the scattering of buildings, excavation for wells, sumps, underground shelter and foreseeable ancillary interventions, e.g. formation of access, uprooting of trees (for safety reasons), suggest that the proposed development should not be located within this relatively unspoilt and undeveloped landscape.”

Such concerns were shared in toto by the Natural Heritage Advisory Committee, which has now been disbanded through the Mepa demerger. On the basis of such concerns and due to the proximity to the Swieqi residential area, the case officer recommended a refusal, only for the application to be suspended until a new fireworks factory policy was woven. The latter policy was bandied about by proponents of the development as the irrefutable champion of approval.

However, the policy states: “The proposed site for a new fireworks factory complex shall not be located within, or adversely affect, scheduled, listed, designated or protected: (i) Areas of Ecological Importance (Levels 1 and 2), or (ii) Sites of Scientific Importance (Levels 1 and 2) ...”. It goes on to say that “candidate sites indicated to qualify for the above designation (in para. 3.2.1) shall likewise not be favourably considered”.

This effectively introduced a chink in the armour of the application. Has this policy been adequately applied in this case? If not, an appeal should be lodged sometime this week since the deadline for the submission of such appeals is this Saturday, July 1.

Għarghur mayor Giljan Aquilina, who has close family members directly involved in the manufacture of fireworks, was upfront about declaring his conflict of interest in heading a local council on the cusp of deciding whether to appeal the extension. However, he described

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his conflict as “small”, which is where I object, since, as announced on the local council's main webpage, he is directly involved in one of the cogs leading to the final fireworks product – i.e. in the paper process.

The mayor's main argument is that there is a need for greater safety for those manufacturing fireworks. But rather than increasing the factory's footprint one could have ensured greater safety by imposing a reduction in the output of fireworks from the same footprint. But this would have been an unpopular decision as it would have tampered with the village's bragging rights in terms of their ability to let off as many fireworks as possible.

The irony in it all is that the Gharghur local council's website is emblazoned with photos of Wied id-Dis, which it touts as one of the major attractions of the locality. It is a pity that the local council was not as fervent in opposing this encroachment on the valley, probably out of fear of not being re-elected come 2019 at the next round of local council elections.

The entire case is imbued with irony. For instance, the Madliena and Swieqi communities have been the most vociferous in objecting to the extension, rather than the Gharghur council, despite the fireworks factory doing its work in honour of the Gharghur patron saint, St Bartholomew. They were right to object, given that the extension is inching even closer to their communities, thus foisting Gharghur parochial interests onto them. Nimbyism in its crystalline form.

Secondly, the Gharghur local council promptly submitted an objection to the Gharghur old people's home, arguing that the proposed site is outside development zone (ODZ) land and a green belt or strategic open gap between Gharghur and Naxxar, and also that traffic will intensify in the area.

Well, we now know that not all ODZ areas are treated in the same way by the Gharghur council. It is legitimate to ask whether their conflicts of interest are obfuscating their opinion. Otherwise they would be quick to realise that one can't really compare a maquis area on the side of Wied id-Dis valley with an abandoned, wayside plot where no trees will be uprooted (disclaimer: I think the latter site is not the most suitable for such a large development). If the local council is really concerned about losing ODZ areas, why is it passing the buck in the fireworks factory issue?

The irony does not stop here. Given that some of the local councillors emphatically objected to large-scale ODZ residential development within the Gharghur locality in previous years, why have they gone strangely quiet all of a sudden?

The mayor contends that public access to the area, cherished by many for walks, will be safeguarded. No one contests this, but a larger fireworks factory footprint and ramblers don't exactly make the best of bedfellows.

Perhaps the most glaring of conflicts of interest is that of MP Michael Falzon, a pyrotechnic enthusiast who acted as legal adviser to the St Bartholomew fireworks factory and played a key role in drafting the 2013 revamped fireworks factory policy. The case was decided on June 2, literally on the eve of the general election, by the three-membered Planning Commission, which took mere minutes to deliberate on this large-scale intervention in a sensitive site.

Such a high-profile case, which is not your run-of-the-mill minor intervention, should have been decided upon by the Planning Board, rather than sneaking it through the Planning Commission at a time when everyone was looking elsewhere.