

Revisiting the Tal-Marga saga



Mepa recently issued enforcement notice ECF 0083/13 following the massive dumping of debris in fields in Gudja, close to Hdas Saptan.

Karkanja Ltd director Euchar Vella, who applied for a planning permit to build three (originally five) properties at Tal-Marga in Qala, tried (The Sunday Times of Malta, April 28) to discredit Anne Zammit's earlier article (April 14) on the same issue. I cannot help being aghast at some applicants' perseverance in driving their point home despite the plethora of legitimate arguments against them.

Vella says: "We accepted to reduce the number of units to three, siting them further inside the development area in a final bid to reach a compromise." What cheek! Why did he submit the first proposal when he was aware the application was way outside the building zone (contrary to the new application)?

The real issue is whether the development will tamper with water flowing downstream, providing much-needed water for irrigation

Part of applicants' time-honoured strategy is to aim ludicrously high the first time round so as then to be perceived by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority as offering some sort of concession when submitting revised plans at a later stage and thus winning brownie points.

Needless to say, Vella plays disingenuous and claims his full rights as an applicant – "God forbid if we ever arrive to the point where an applicant for a building permit cannot make changes to plans in order to address some issue". This 'protocol' or script of perseverance by applicants is recited over and over again.

Regarding the fact that, in the latter application, only the swimming pools protrude in the Outside Development Zone, this is little consolation indeed, even though this is sanctioned by current Mepa policy. Whether it's a swimming pool or any other amenity, rather than a building, it's still pushing the development footprint further out and, consequently, the baseline from where further building zone extension schemes might be conducted.

I share Zammit's amazement at how the existing boundary of the building zone cuts right through the valley water catchment zone. With the Malta Resources Authority's and hydrologist Marco Cremona's reports both finding serious faults with the initial application, it is hard to fathom how such criticism can be appeased through antics such as having a building on stilts, even if this may be technically feasible (and I am not competent to judge this).

Blaming the current flooding problems on the existing road infrastructure or on the Qala council for not cleaning the culverts is a non-starter since catchment areas are, by definition, meant to flood temporarily to allow water to seep into the subsoil or as a transit area for water before it flows to lower stretches of valleys by gravity. Cleaning the culverts will help alleviate the flooding but will not solve it... this is tantamount to people in a tropical rainforest complaining about the stifling humidity levels.

The applicant's architect asserted that the flooding problems on site will remain unresolved if the proposal is not given the green light – so are we to view the proposal in question as a kind of panacea through which the applicant will solve the flooding problem once and for all for the Qala community?

The real issue to address is not the flooding of the site since, I reiterate, this is a catchment area, not a plateau – the real issue is whether the development will tamper with the volume of water flowing downstream, which in turn feeds numerous wells providing much-needed water for irrigation. Is the Appeals Tribunal ready to take responsibility for what could possibly translate into another Nadur cemetery debacle?

Is the incorporation of a water cistern with a permeable rock bottom (so as not hinder recharge of the aquifer) to collect surface water collected on the roof of the development, and other cosmetic changes to the initial plans, enough for this proposal to be endorsed? Whatever happened to the precautionary principle?

Congratulations over tree protection

The Government's establishment of a consultative committee to formulate recommendations about the preservation and pruning of trees in urban and rural areas is a step in the right direction, especially when one considers the mauling mature trees have repeatedly suffered at the hands of landscaping authorities over the years.

Some of the members of the voluntary committee have been clamouring for years for more consideration when it comes to the treatment of mature trees and the setting up of such a committee is certainly welcome.

Recent enforcement action at Gudja

Mepa recently issued an enforcement notice (ECF 83/13) at Gudja for the dumping of huge (see above photo) quantity of inert material at Gudja, close to the Has Saptan olive grove.

Bringing Perseus to local stakeholders

As part of the European Maritime Day public activities, the Policy-Orientated Marine Environmental Research for the Southern European Seas (Perseus) project is holding a one-hour workshop for local marine stakeholders tomorrow from 12pm to 1pm at St James Cavalier.

Participation is free of charge and all local marine stakeholders are invited to attend, such as those involved in maritime transport, tourism, navigation and security, marine policy-making and management, maritime law and marine research.

The International Ocean Institute-Malta Operational Centre at the University is a partner in the Seventh Framework Programme-funded Perseus project, which has a total budget of €15 million and assesses the dual impact of human activity and natural pressures on the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

Perseus merges natural and socio-economic sciences to predict the long-term effects of these pressures on marine ecosystems. The project aims to design an effective and innovative research governance framework, which will provide the basis for policymakers to turn back the tide on marine life degradation. For further details about the project visit www.perseus-net.eu/site/content.php.