

Is MEPA losing control?



Caught in the act - impromptu and illegal tree-cutting along the Ghar Hasan coastal road in Birzebbuga. Only plain clothed green wardens with digital cameras can help stem such a flow

Despite my limitations, in today's column, using photographic evidence, I have managed to report at least four instances of illegal development in pristine areas of our islands, at San Martin Valley, Mosta, Selmun and Zonqor. One can therefore imagine what a cohort of 'green wardens', each armed with digital cameras, would be able to do!

Despite almost weekly articles exhorting MEPA not to drag its feet on elusive actions such as 'enforcement' and 'direct action', MEPA does not appear to be clambering up the learning curve any time soon.

With all the hype surrounding the Mgiebah 'room with a view' case (to date still unresolved, with an ex-MEPA enforcement officer still untouched by MEPA's so-called 'enforcement'), one would have expected MEPA to keep its eyes peeled to avoid any other carbon copies of this same unfortunate incident.

However, this is certainly not the case, with an illegal development sprouting just opposite the San Martin Valley cave chapel. MEPA claims that enforcement officers visited the site on several occasions but could not trace those responsible, despite the presence of numerous cars parked near the development as seen from the photograph carried with the article.

Enforcement notice ECF 990/04 has been issued therefore against 'unknowns'. One can recall that, in the Mgiebah case, in a first instance, MEPA also found itself in the same cul-de-sac, asking those making the report to identify themselves and those responsible.

Meanwhile, works progress on the San Martin 'property', ideally masked by mature olive trees and a makeshift fence of cut reeds. How can one envisage a return to pristine conditions once the property nears completion? Rather, 'developers' would then be made to comply with certain conditions in return for a sanctioning.

While being grateful to the MEPA PR office for providing useful information about some of the cases reported, I would suggest they bolster their facilities even further since some of my queries have been pending for weeks now. Also, the bedraggled MEPA enforcement section should be beefed up (and not with office bureaucrats) since the same few individuals are repeatedly having to face the music.

MEPA claims that its policies are containing urban sprawl (MEPA Website December 21) since, as claimed by Director of Planning Architect Chris Borg, since converted and redeveloped units constituted 46 per cent of all permits granted in 2003 and that redevelopment is increasing at a very rapid rate with a near 200 per cent increase per year.

Such statistics are certainly encouraging if considered from a particular perspective only. Rarely will you encounter laymen rummaging through such statistics who will realise that:

* the Structure Plan Review (SPR) exercise currently under way has concluded that conservative estimates of our housing residential capacity indicate an oversupply in the sector - MEPA granted an average annual 3,000 residence permits between 1995 and 2000, despite an annual average growth of just 1,700 residences. Now I don't know what the demand for new residences in 2003 was but the granting of a staggering 6,128 residence permits by MEPA in 2003 sounds exaggerated.

* the same statistics give no inkling as to how many of the residences granted permits by MEPA were actually occupied within the next few months or else ended up bolstering the numbers of 'vacant buildings' in our country.

* although the ratio of old to new dwellings almost doubled between 2002 and 2003, the number of 'new dwellings' still increased dramatically, from 1,840 to 2,760 - hardly the way to curb urbanisation.

It appears that MEPA is not heeding recommendations made in its own SPR exercise to keep up demand for the all-powerful construction industry in this country. It's very well to boast of an increasing use of 'old buildings' and 'apartments', but the overall numbers must decrease as well.

Conflicts of interest

All the protests about blatant conflicts of interest at MEPA have finally borne fruit - Minister George Pullicino claimed that the audit officer at MEPA had been asked to delve into this sensitive issue, especially in relations that MEPA members of staff could have with people involved in the real estate sector, the way employees communicated with certain applicants, the transmission of information after members of staff left the authority and any potential conflicts that some members had with their part-time work (MEPA Website, November 30).

This is an especially welcome development and, now that the die is cast, everybody will be waiting for any outcomes in the foreseeable future. My ingrained scepticism prompts me to hazard a guess that very little will come out of this since, as I have pointed out countless times before, the planning system itself is flawed, with architects often sitting on both sides of the same fence. Hence, I wish to be proved wrong.

Helicopter service resumes

Mr V.G. Mercieca's letter (The Sunday Times, January 16) in which he exhorts Government to extend the Gozo airstrip could not be more ill-timed as it was published on the same day that news of the renewal of the Gozo helicopter service was given.

In his letter, Mr Mercieca, like many others before him, clamours for the airstrip extension, mainly on the grounds that the earmarked site at Ta' Lambert is an 'active dump' and that the helicopter service is financially not viable.

Helicopteros del Sureste from Spain will operate the helicopter service without any public subsidies and will run an average of 10 flights a day between the Gozo heliport and Malta Airport. The helicopter will carry 13 passengers - an average daily 10 flights makes for up to 130 passengers - and surely the number of flights can be increased in the peak season since we are tackling average values here.

It has transpired that the ticket will cost Lm30 one-way and Lm50 return (Lm26 and Lm16 respectively for Gozitans). Even the most gloomy prophets will admit that at such prices, it would be rather impractical to expect more than 130 travellers to use the service every day.

One has to concede however that the Ta' Lambert environs are not exactly ideal. What is the typically Maltese suggested facelift for dilapidated areas? Develop it, partly or in full. If the proponents have the Ta' Lambert area so much to heart, they should lobby for a clean-up of the area. The exhortation for a runway extension, be it a grass or tarmac one, would also inadvertently mean the development of ancillary activities in the area, such as catering, etc., with the result that the committed area would mushroom.

Salina sham

The Burmarrad/Salina works saga provides yet another unexpected twist, with MEPA DCC 01-01A/05 approving on January 3 PA 03970/04, submitted on behalf of the Works Division, for the maintenance and dredging (cleaning) of existing, blocked and silted up stormwater channel at Salina, two months after works had already been completed!

A brief chronology will illustrate the hilarity better... on July 7, 2004, the Works Division applied for the permit to carry out works in what should be a protected area, carried out the works between August and October and the permit was finally granted in January!

I wonder if it dawned on the hapless DCC board members on the decision day that their meeting was actually quite an obsolete one since there was a *fait accompli*, to put it mildly. Predictably, despite a recommendation to refuse planning permission, the DCC board on January 3 gave its go-ahead to the works since, in the event of a permit refusal, taking the Works Division (and the government) to court was certainly not a palatable prospect!

Silver linings

Locally, January 16 has been designated as Arbor Day (National Tree Day). To mark the occasion, this month is, as always, speckled with tree-planting activities, including the collection of oak tree acorns by HSBC employees (under the auspices of Nature Trust) and by St Aloysius College students and their eventual potting to establish oak tree nurseries. More details about such activities will be carried in the next GWB.

The first feeble signs of the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP) were witnessed recently in our islands with the introduction of a meagre financial contribution on every plastic bag. Plastic bags are often considered to be 'environmental morays' due to their persistence and mobility, even ending up on beaches on remote oceanic islands and smothering all forms of marine life, besides generating hazardous toxin cocktails (such as dioxins) through their burning.

One hopes that such an introduction prompts customers to solicit outlets to reintroduce cloth bags, an initiative which some have naively interpreted as going contrary to notions of

'progress'. Predictably, the eco-tax introduction was given an acrimonious reception since it bites the Maltese where it hurts - their pockets. This three-tiered system (since biodegradable, degradable and non-biodegradable bags are differentially taxed) will be more effective once biodegradable bags are again available on the market.

The police Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) section again deserve a resounding 'chapeau' for their sterling work in stemming the flow of illegal bird smuggling when they manage to intercept and seize 450 smuggled finches. One hopes that such feats by the ALE are complemented by adequate fines being meted out by the courts.

Also laudable is the introduction of Green leaders in Governmental offices to co-ordinate environmental concerns and activities in national entities to assist the attaining of EU environmental standards.

deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk