

Protecting Europe's waters



Reason prevailed as the Malta Environment and Planning Authority refused two applications for the development of two flood-prone Outside Development Zone sites at Tal-Marga in Qala.

News that the construction industry has been facing a downturn in terms of its economic contribution since 2008 (going down from a 4.8 per cent gross-value-added contribution in 2008 to a four per cent contribution in 2011), despite a boom in the local real estate market, is food for thought.

The most obvious consideration to make is that the glut in properties on the local market is evident, as otherwise, such diverging trends between the two sectors would not be possible.

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- Alan Deidun

Secondly, although the slowdown in the construction industry is of concern to the Malta Developers Association and economists, it might be a relief to those who believe Malta is stifled by perennial construction sites and that the industry has wielded economic clout for far too long to ingratiate itself with the political class.

In light of these emerging statistics, and perhaps eventually by an effective party financing bill, there is much scope for decoupling players in the construction industry from the political class.

Same old seaside problems persist

The abrupt swing from cold to warm weather and the glorious sunshine that has blessed Malta over the past two weekends have fuelled the en masse migration to the seaside.

This migration has exposed some recurring limitations in the country's coastal infrastructure, namely parking facilities at popular bays such as Ġnejna, Golden Bay (near the Scouts' camping grounds) and Mġiebañ, with haphazardly parked cars, rainwater-filled gulleys and trenches and soddy terrain and sand.

There are no quick-fix solutions in sight, as our coastal infrastructure has for a long time been heaving under two causes of distress which work in synergy – an unsustainable number of vehicles, long past Malta's carrying capacity, and the Maltese knack of parking as close as possible to the seaside.

The only positive development is Mellieħa council's initiative to restrict vehicular access down to the heavily-eroded Mġiebah clay slopes, which will hopefully alleviate some human pressures from the area this summer.

EU Horizon 2020

The EU Commission is set to overhaul its research and innovation framework programmes. In fact, the latest batch of research calls in the current framework programmes (FP7) will be

issued in mid-2012, before Horizon 2020 takes over.

Horizon 2020 is the Commission's novel financial instrument implementing 'Innovation Union', a flagship initiative aimed at securing Europe's global competitiveness. Running from 2014 to 2020, with an estimated budget of €80 billion, Horizon 2020 aims to spearhead the creation of new jobs and economic growth.

Two interesting aspects of the programme include the bolstering of funding, by a considerable 77 per cent, of the acclaimed European Research Council, and the further simplification of rules for prospective applicants.

The Horizon 2020 framework will fund research and innovation in many subjects that are of major concern to Europeans, including climate change, developing sustainable transport and mobility, making renewable energy more affordable and ensuring food safety and security.

Sustainable use of freshwater in Europe

The European Environmental Agency (EEA) has just released its latest detailed report, this time on water usage practices throughout the continent.

The document is the first in a series of five reports that the EEA will publish this year to provide policy-relevant information to support the development of the 'Blueprint to safeguard Europe's waters'.

The report is a treasure trove of data and anecdotes about the success at using water more efficiently throughout Europe.

For example, a reduction in the amount of water used to irrigate grapevines – ranging from 16.5 per cent during rainy years to 53 per cent in dry years – resulted in no significant impact on the grape yield or the quality.

In Spain, between 2002 and 2008, the area irrigated by gravity methods (flooding) decreased from around 1.4 million hectares to just above one million. Over the same period, the area of land under drip irrigation increased from 1.1m hectares to 1.6m hectares.

The report condenses diametrically opposed realities across Europe when it comes to water stress – for example, on average, agriculture accounts for about a third of all freshwater consumption throughout the EU, but this figure could spiral up to 80 per cent in southern Europe.

The document also reports the results of an innovative technique developed recently and which aims to calculate the 'nitrogen surplus' – an estimate of the potential surplus of nitrogen on agricultural land – by calculating the balance between nitrogen added to an agricultural system and nitrogen removed from the system per hectare of agricultural land. It is currently the best indication of agricultural pressures on water environment.

This is very relevant to Malta where the nitrate problem has become the bane of many farmers and water bowser operators.

Reverse osmosis plants are even being installed by some farmers and most bowser licences have been withheld as a result of burgeoning nitrate loads in groundwater.

Unfortunately, the results emerging from this technique are not available for Malta, with decoupling between nitrogen surplus and economic growth in the agricultural sector being reported in just eight of the 21 investigated EU countries over the 2000-2008 period.

This means that, in these countries, less nitrate fertilisers were applied but the agricultural sector still continued to register economic growth.

The report candidly states that, in some EU countries, particularly in the south, flat pricing rates are still applied for water consumption in agriculture, thus not providing any incentive for farmers to cut back on their freshwater usage.

This is still a common occurrence in Malta and Cyprus, with metering in the agricultural sector across the EU generally on the increase.

The full report may be downloaded from www.eea.europa.eu/publications/towards-efficient-use-of-water.

www.alandeidun.eu