

Grey concrete alliance is born



One hopes Mellieħa local council's proposals to prevent parking on the Mġiebaħ clay slopes are endorsed and implemented before next summer.

The recent gathering of all major local developers in a single unified force under the helm of ex-minister Michael Falzon and developer Sandro Chetcuti should be enough to send shivers down the spine of any conscientious local citizen.

Despite the effort of the newly set up Malta Developers Association (MDA) to assure the many people who are understandably wary of this new association, those with a genuine interest in our islands' natural environment are still plagued by misgivings.

Firstly, Falzon said the association is against over-development. How can such a claim, which prima facie is laudable, be taken seriously when one considers that he himself was the architect behind the original plans for the development at Tad-Dib in Mosta, which consisted of five-storey blocks with no front gardens? How would the MDA describe such a development – rational or cluttered?

Other council members are also involved in increasing the development footprint at Għajn Żejtuna in Mellieħa. The MDA should put its money where its mouth is and openly declare that it is against further ODZ development or further scheme rationalisation. Only then will its claims not ring hollow.

Secondly, Falzon said the media and the Malta Environment and Planning Authority reform are skewed in favour of environmental NGOs, with government consulting the latter and with Mepa officials more than with developers. His statement does not tally with developers and their representatives and architects occupying the front rows of each and every public meeting that government organised regarding the proposed Mepa reform.

And if, by a long stretch of the imagination, his allegation were to be true, such skewness is sacrosanct in an island all too blighted by over-development.

Thirdly, he said the MDA is in favour of party financing and that its members would abide by a code of ethics. No glitzy report nor hot air will do in the circumstances but concrete action. Will the MDA put its money where its mouth is and present the government with concrete proposals as to how party financing by their members can be fully exposed?

But Falzon surely takes the biscuit for his claim that one of the MDA's founding objectives is to fight the negative public perception that dogs developers in general in Malta, and that developers are currently passing through bad times, compounded by the tripling of Mepa fees.

It is hard to feel compassion for such crocodile tears when one considers the millions amassed by these developers over the years at the expense of Malta's natural environment, and the circa 55,000 vacant residences that exist.

Developers have only themselves to blame for the negative comments they get from the media and the public, after repeatedly coming up with preposterous development projects. No amount of make-up or ad hoc public relations will spruce up their image.

How can one reconcile the MDA's pledge that it is against over-development with its denouncement of the new Mepa fees, which ironically were uttered in the same breath?

The MDA has already resorted to the tactic of saying that such fees are beyond the means of 'small' developers. As if the MDA is genuinely concerned for small developers! The way to look after the interests of such small fry is not by issuing an all-embracing fatwa, but to call upon the government to reduce such fees for small-scale development alone.

This is the same blunder that the Labour Party made lately when it presented a motion in Parliament to have the revised Mepa tariffs repealed. Large developers would benefit from such a concession in the same way as small ones, thus quashing any hopes of a green revolution within the party.

The hand-picking of particular people to lead the MDA reeks of a settling of scores with the developers' section of the Malta Chamber of SMEs (GRTU).

So does the scramble to secure the bragging rights over the highest number of developers that are members within each association and the effort to secure the industry's top brass, such as developer Charles Polidano.

As long as the feud is over the number and profile of the respective association members, there is little cause for alarm.

It is when the two associations start jockeying to see who can pull the greater concession from government and Mepa for their members that Malta's natural assets will really be in trouble.

Collecting rainwater

With all the current palaver about the preservation of groundwater, one very simple measure that could be embarked upon in this regard seems to be eluding many.

The recently-launched water policy for Malta regurgitates the call made in Action 66 of the National Strategy for Policy and Abatement Measures Relating to the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions that "domestic users are to be propelled to integrate water captured in wells with the plumbing system for secondary use". However, it is reticent as to how this should be achieved.

In addition, Legal Notice 261 of 2008, the Minimum Requirement on the Energy Buildings Regulations, and the document on the Conservation of Fuel, Energy and Natural Resources, both require the collection of rainwater in suitable wells or cisterns.

Besides clamouring for new development to include wells in their design, the government should also earmark financial incentives for people who already possess a well which, however, is in need of repair to render it operational again.

The hundreds, if not thousands, of domestic wells that are in a state of disrepair could be brought back on stream through a scheme offering financial help, similar to the one adopted for the preservation of wooden balconies.

Last call for biodiversity

Biodiversity has been hogging the limelight over the past few months and the 10th conference of the parties of the Convention for Biological Diversity will be convened between tomorrow and October 29 in Nagoya, Japan.

After the abject failure to meet the target established in 2002 to halt biodiversity loss by 2010, new targets are expected to be set at this important meeting. In particular, the conference is expected to adopt a new strategic plan for 2011-2020, including a 2020 biodiversity target and a 2050 'biodiversity vision'.

It is also expected that a new international regime will be adopted on access to the world's genetic resources and the equitable sharing of the benefits derived from them.

The IUCN (World Conservation Union) is calling for a one-hundredfold increase in funding for biodiversity conservation. It believes such an increase can only be achieved by mobilising resources at all levels, from national to international, and from all sources, both public and private.