

Dissecting the 2.4 per cent



The waste disposal facilities at Maghtab.

Writs and libel suits flying in all directions have again stolen the limelight, with few discerning individuals taking the pains to actually dissect the 'rationalisation' of the new development criteria.

Some eyebrow-raising scheme inclusions include the following (the author thanks AD environmental committee and NTM for help with this section):

Marsascala - a large plot close to Il-Magħluq reserve (good agricultural land, albeit not irrigated), an area behind the waterpolo pitch. While the envisaged scheme inclusions for Marsascala amount to an area 20 times the one occupied by St Anne parish church, a panoply of vacant flats and apartments are awaiting tenants, such as in Triq il-Gardiell, Triq Gidwet, Triq l-Ahmar and Triq il-Hamrija, while ta' Monita complex lies in a shambles

Attard - two sizable plots of land past Mount Carmel Hospital on the other side of the road

Mellieha - while the Tas-Sellum area has been spared further marring, the owners (mainly Tumas Group) have been compensated for their perceived loss by another plot a stone's throw away from a Natura 2000 site leading to Mgjebah.

Siggiewi - two large plots of land, one on the uncommitted side of the bypass leading to the village and the other further up.

Dingli - the proposals extend the development cordon closer to Dingli Cliffs.

Gharghur - reputedly, the town with the greatest riptides, with Ta' Xwieki Housing Estate set to double, and areas facing Wied Madliena and Wied id-Dis and along Naxxar Road also set to be developed. Gharghur and Naxxar will effectively coalesce into one area, as did Naxxar and Mosta, Birkirkara and Balzan.

Birzebuga - the inclusion of a 'disused quarry' within the scheme at Tal-Papa. The quarry is in reality not a derelict site, as might be construed, but has been tilled for over 50 years and harbours about 130 fruit trees (see The Sunday Times, June 4, page 16).

Sannat - an arable area of historical value (at Ta' Xaman) is to be included.

Despite closing the tap on future ODZ permits, the recent proposals still send a clear signal to developers - develop illegally and wait in the wings since your development might one day be sanctioned, as is being proposed across various sites in Qormi (e.g., along Mdina Road).

Other harrowing statistics include:

There is enough land within the development zone for over 98,000 dwellings when just 41,200 are needed by 2020. Hence, the frequently clichéd figure that we have enough development land till 2020 is wrong since there is land for even longer than that, if the same land is used wisely

Only 42 per cent of the land to be included was actually proposed by MEPA itself in its local plan drafting exercise. Had the 1995 legislation stipulating that local plans were first to be approved by Parliament not been passed, today we would have seven approved local plans and it would have been much more difficult to make the proposed changes.

About 58 per cent of the land to be included is privately owned.

Besides the above list, one would then expect further inclusions after 2016 (or even before) to address the 2006 'anomalies'. Minister George Pullicino is still in time to reverse a building spree that he will regret when looking back in 10, 20 years' time.

The projected 2.4% (or roughly the size of Siggiewi) increase in Malta's built-up patrimony is peppercorn solace indeed, especially when one considers that with such an increase we would have surpassed the 25% mark, way ahead of the EU average of 7%. I wonder what the National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSO) has to say about this.

I fully embrace the minister's assertion that no land of ecological value will be included in the scheme revision. However, abusing the ecological justification irks me as it is not being considered. To categorically exclude from protection all land that is not ecologically sensitive or irrigated farmland is a jaundiced vision indeed - what about the cultural, human values imparted by farmland abutting on urban areas?

The emotive and didactic experience regaling children, normally accustomed to closed quarters, walking to school through a country lane compensates for the paucity in ecologically important species or agricultural produce of that land in question. Do we need to justify the existence of every single space in these islands - when will 'ecologically-unimportant open space become valuable?'

The 2.4% assumes much more sobering proportions when seen in a more holistic fashion. Summing up the swathes of land to be encroached upon by other proposed gargantuan projects, namely the two golf courses at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra and Ta' Cenc, the engineered landfill at L-Ghallis ta' Gewwa and road-widening projects such as the Manikata one, one would easily end up with 4-5% increase.

Granted, the sites earmarked for the golf courses and for the engineered landfill will not be fully-fledged building sites, but they will certainly be off-limits to the public - this effectively means hemming in the populace even more between different built-up areas, in a country where urban conurbations are not visible from just 10% of our area. The 2.4% should be used for projects of national importance, such as the engineered landfill, rather than being squandered in this way.

It's becoming more of a feat to chart the routes to take for local hikes (not coffee-table or promenade strolls) in 'remote' areas - we have to resign ourselves to downgrading our recreational expectations to places like Buskett, San Anton Gardens and other 'domesticated, pink concrete' attractions.

In addition, the list of all those subscribing to have their plot of land being included should be made public along with the proposed sites so that brazen proposals do not even see the light of day - in this way, behind-the-scenes lobbying would be mitigated.

Ta' Cenc

Din I-Art Helwa should be commended for setting up an online petition to save Ta' Cenc. So far 4,000 signatures have been collected, and the aim is to surpass 20,000. If you are still in doubt whether to sign or not, read the interview with Martin Galea (DLH president) in The Times (June 5) on the Net and then visit www.savetacenc.com.

Nature Trust (Malta) certainly has no qualms about having bestowed the Green Politician award to Marisa Micallef - in fact, she recently consolidated her green credentials by querying the reason for excluding Ta' Cenc from the list of specially protected areas, when MEPA had stated in February 2005 that Ta' Cenc would be listed for EU protection in the Natura 2000 sites and when the whole stretch of coastline from Dwejra in Gozo to Marsaxlokk in Malta have been designated as Natura 2000 sites.

Minister Pullicino quotes MEPA experts as saying that Ta' Cenc "as a whole" does not qualify for Natura 2000 status. What does this broad statement actually mean? The EIA has revealed the presence of a substantial number of endemic or rare species. Why then not at least protect these sites? Probably because this would disrupt plans for the area, which require the total availability of the land, rather than parcelling it up into a chequered maze of protected and unprotected sites.

Golf... rearing its ugly head again

In an interview with Malta Today, Minister Pullicino has stated that the Xaghra I-Hamra golf course is still on track. Could someone (even from the Malta Tourism Authority) then communicate this to the Manikata farmers who are still bogged down - to date, they have only been afforded rumours, for example, that the golf course project has been put on ice.

At the same time, however, those farming families whose lease had been abruptly terminated by Government are still in the same deplorable situation, with a family even having the lease on their house being terminated. This makes for a very miserable, uncertain existence.

Ramona Depares, writing in The Sunday Circle last week, blows the trumpet of golfing by deodorising the pastime in her "Hole in One" article. The thing backfires, however, since she realistically shows that the pastime is mainly enjoyed by "up-and-coming business people", not by the sort who would cherish preserving Ta' Cenc or Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra for picnics or walks with their families.

Ms Depares tries to convince us that taking up the sport is not that expensive, but the glitter ends here. In the photos she includes with her article, I see golfers surrounded by arid, 'faintly green' lawns, belying the tremendous amounts of water needed to maintain them. Some pride was restored in the same magazine through Claire Bonello's article "The fat and the furious", which highlights the need to take our children in the outdoors to avoid obesity.

Proposed Manikata bypass

One of the latest reports issued by the European Environment Agency (EEA) is entitled "Transport and Environment: facing a dilemma". The title itself is especially apt for the local situation, where the two almost seem to be diametrically opposed.

The Structure Plan review exercise itself has identified the misappropriation of ca. 800 tumoli of land through ill-conceived road planning and design. We already boast of ca. 2,500 km of roads - in close analogy to the 'rationalisation' process currently under way, the best way we propose to mitigate this unsustainable situation is to open up even more roads.

Just as the farmers' lobby group did in a press conference they organised at the end of May, I will quote from the North West Local Plan (still not approved, like four other local plans): "Manikata is a small village surrounded by countryside of high agricultural, landscape and archaeological value...

"The character of the village is dominated by the serenity and quiet environment created by the low number of residents and compactness of the dwellings, and the very few traffic movements through the streets... (There is a need for) restricting the sprawl of tourism and recreational development from the western side of the village... (and the need to) protect the residential character and amenity of the village and support only those activities which enhance community identity." Hence, the writing on the wall could not be clearer.

Confusion reigns over the nitty-gritty of the whole proposals, with the farmers and their representatives (Kumitat għall-Harsien ta' l-Ambjent Rurali ta' Ghajn Tuffieha) stating that the proposed road would cut through existing fields and even through a 100-year-old farmhouse in the whereabouts of Ghajn Znuber, while the Roads Ministry vehemently denies this, stating instead that existing roads will be widened, along with the excavation of a 499 m-long tunnel.

Some of this confusion has been dispelled lately, with the ADT (Transport Authority) meeting farmers and deciding to go back to the drawing board to find an alternative route for the road. All this rumpus in the name of solving the problem at Xemxija Hill, used daily by 23,000 vehicles (expected to increase to 26,000 daily by 2010). One hopes that this is the real reason and not to provide a convenient short cut for golfers to the proposed Xaghra l-Hamra golf course.

A search conducted in the National Archives by Mario Cardona, the farmers' chief spokesman, reveals an interesting 'signs of the times' cue. During the British occupation, the Public Works Department of the time had approved the opening of 20-foot 'tactical roads' in the Manikata environs since this would involve the taking up of very small amounts of farmland and would help farmers in their work. Today, farming concerns are far from being a priority and the envisaged roads will be 'slightly' wider than 20 feet.

Completely in contrast to the ADT's approachable stance on the matter, the MTA has provided very little information to the farmers and their representatives.

Parties in reserves

Labour MP Adrian Vassallo earned my support and admiration for his latest denunciation of the issuing of permits for rave parties in ecologically sensitive areas, such as at Buskett, Hagar Qim and Paradise Bay. This column has repeatedly insisted that such areas be spared the cacophony associated with such parties.

My admiration, however, soon evaporated when I read the following statement attributed to the same MP: "Where were Nature Trust, Din l-Art Helwa and other similar organisations to protest against such activities in areas so sensitive for flora and fauna? They seemed to speak up only when it suited them." Only when it suited them? Is something being insinuated here?

NTM has repeatedly spoken out against such party venues in the past and will continue to do so - NGOs cannot speak out against or in favour of issues when individuals expect them to since otherwise they risk being accused of harbouring vested interests.

One must appreciate that NGOs have very limited resources and the load currently being taken by NTM upon itself means that its manpower is being stretched to the limit. People cannot expect to turn to NGOs at any moment to set right every grievance or problem that arises when politicians then cannot even agree on legislation which would give legal status to NGOs. A constant recourse to NGOs for their intervention is a clear sign of approval for the work they carry out. Why not also translate such approval into something more tangible?