

The allure of relocating



The former batching plant in Ghaxaq, which rubs shoulders with nearby residences, where a developer has proposed the construction of four large oil storage tanks, apparently without carrying out an Environment Impact Assessment.

Relocating from residential areas business premises that are potentially hazardous or detrimental to health, such as petrol stations, have in recent years been projected as a step in the right direction, since they improve the quality of life in the areas where they were formerly located.

Such rationale has been used, for example, to push through the relocation of the petrol station from St Anne's Street, Floriana, to Ta' Buqana in Mosta, with the latter site being disproportionately larger, and including car-wash and dining facilities.

Similarly, planning application PA 04720/03, which proposes the relocation of petrol station activities from a residential area in Birkirkara to a site in Valletta Road, Ghaxaq, that is licensed as a batching plant, seems at face value quite benign. One might argue that there is nothing contentious about such a proposal since, after all, petrol stations jar (to put it mildly) with residential areas.

This would be true if the proposed development at the relocation site was faithful to the previous development, rather than involving a scaling-up of activities, as is being proposed at Ghaxaq. In fact, the proposal includes the construction of four tanks, some of which can be almost five storeys high.

The proposed tanks will presumably be used for the storage of oil. I use the term 'presumably' because there is no Project Description Statement available online, and very few details regarding the use of the proposed tanks, so residents of Ghaxaq and adjacent localities are having to consult the file on the project directly at Mepa offices in Floriana.

One must also mention that no Environment Impact Assessment or Environmental Planning Statement for the proposal was drawn up, even though the proposal possibly qualifies as a Category I or Category II development as per Schedule I of Legal Notice 204 of 2001, which under clause 2.7.1.1 refers to development designated as the 'erection of an installation for incinerating, treating, processing, recycling and destruction of hazardous waste and spent oil'.

However, according to Ghaxaq council, which has taken the initiative to urge residents to sign a petition against the development, the developer is already using the site to store and treat residue from the Rinella tank-cleaning facility, without the necessary permits. In fact, a large number of empty oil drums can be seen on the site, and the council has repeatedly reported the matter to Mepa.

Besides the obvious detrimental visual impact that such tanks would have on an area that is outside the development zone (ODZ) and still largely rural (with the Santu Spirtu chapel as a backdrop), there are several other facts that militate against the approval of such an application, including:

- The fields adjacent to the proposed relocation site are still actively being used by a full-time horticulturist to grow ornamental flowers;
- The site is next to an area designated as a hub for small and medium-sized enterprises, and the presence of welding activities on site cheek and jowl with oil-storage or treating facilities is not exactly the epitome of health and safety best practice;
- Similarly, the site lies close to an underground Enemalta tunnel with cables between the two power stations;
- The prevailing north-west wind blows directly over the proposed site towards a handful of residences lying a few hundred metres away, and towards the village of Ghaxaq, raising concerns over the dispersion of hazardous chemicals from the oil-storage facilities, such as volatile organic compounds. Has the developer been requested to provide any dispersion models?

Kercem mushroom farm

A month ago, I drew attention to planning application PA 05707/07, proposing to construct a mushroom farm at a 16,000 square metre site at Ta' Dbiegi, Gozo. I have since changed some opinions that I had expressed in that column in the light of a more detailed analysis of the application and a visit that I conducted to a separate mushroom farm, as well as legitimate arguments put forward by the developers' team, namely that:

- The site lies squarely within the precincts of Kercem, not in Gharb, despite Ta' Dbiegi crafts village lying in Gharb. More precisely, the site borders on one side the boundary between the two localities. Despite this, the developer's team still held information meetings with the mayors of Kercem, Gharb and San Lawrenz.
- The site is entirely privately-owned and is not included within the linear country parkways and circular walking routes in the Gozo and Comino local plan;
- A total of 17 different sites for the location of the proposed development were assessed, including the one within the Xewkija industrial estate, which was eventually ditched when it transpired that most of the site was leased to Enemalta and hence not available;
- A number of landscaping measures have been included in the development design to further mitigate its visual impact, including partly lowering the building into the ground, installing a green landscaped roof and planting shrubs (since the site is largely devoid of trees);
- The proposed development will result in a lowering of the high volume of traffic generated by the developer's other mushroom cultivation operations, since there will no further be need to import substrate from abroad (eliminating 110 12-metre trailers from the road);
- The proposed development will create demand for 1,400 tons of chicken manure produced in Gozo, a waste which, due to its nitrate content, is quite difficult to dispose of in view of the implementation of the Nitrates Directive (which also concerns groundwater quality), and will also financially benefit chicken farmers;
- Straw to be utilised in the making of the substrate will not be imported but will instead be grown locally;
- It was Mepa that designated the proposed development as 'industrial agricultural', which, like intensive animal-rearing facilities, can also be sited in ODZ areas as long as they satisfy certain criteria.

More positive initiatives

It is worth mentioning a number of positive initiatives have been recently embarked upon. These include the scheduling by Mepa of four ecologically important sites around the Maltese islands, the lowering of rubble walls to the stipulated 1.2m and the demolition of illegal rooms around Fort Campbell in Selmun, in a Natura 2000 site.

A blogger on timesofmalta.com website lamented the desecration of private land through the lowering of rubble walls, ignoring the reason why many choose to raise these walls so obtrusively, that is, to conceal not-so-legitimate activities, such as illegal building, topsoil removal, etc. Fast-growing Eucalyptus trees are often used for the same purpose.

Hopefully, the momentum to demolish illegal structures will extend to all areas around Malta and Gozo, not just those within Natura 2000 sites, and will not be derailed by sob stories from illegal tenants saying 'their' rooms have been there since time immemorial.