

The Central Malta Local Plan



The ramshackle coastal development at Bahar ic-Caghaq should be dismantled

The Structure Plan review, an exercise by MEPA aimed at revamping our ten-year-old Structure Plan, forecasts that the Central Malta Local Plan (CMLP) area in 2020 will be our demographic kingpin.

In fact, of the seven Local Plan areas, the CMLP one (currently home to 27 per cent of our total population) will equal the South Malta Local Plan (SMLP) area (29 per cent) in terms of household proportions, since both will make up 31 per cent of the total demographic pool. In other words, a dwelling in one of the 11 localities included in this local plan is becoming increasingly coveted.

The importance of Malta's heartland transpires from sheer numbers - about 103,000 people live here, including 22,000 living in Birkirkara alone, making it the largest settlement in the Maltese Islands.

A cause for concern is that the densely built-up Grand Harbour Local Plan (GHLP) area is being generally avoided and depopulated so that a growing urbanisation and construction footprint is taking over other Local Plan areas.

The "spoils" of this "micro-migration" are more vacant, abandoned buildings in the Harbour area. One can only augur that the brains behind local plans use these points to learn from past experience in mitigating the increasing urbanisation of our islands.

Lija

One fully endorses efforts to safeguard the identity of Lija as distinct from that of other adjacent towns and villages by curbing further development in the Hal Mann area. Similarly, however, concrete steps must be taken for the safeguard of the olive grove next to Preziosi Street, recently earmarked for the building of a home for the elderly, and action to stop the detrimental dust and particles from the extensive quarrying and batching activities along Mosta Road, which smother all greenery in the area during the dry season.

Also laudable are proposals to safeguard the extensive private residential gardens within the village centre - after all, Lija was once a large garden with the towering Belvedere (still to be seen) in its centre.

Attard

The Local Plan notes that this village has experienced a 65 per cent growth in its population from 1985 to 1998. The Local Plan states that further extension of the development zones in the locality will be curbed, although it permits some leeway for the Ta' Bajdun area.

While acknowledging the growing traffic jams in Attard (quoting from the CMLP, 29,000 vehicles pass daily through Triq Nutar Zarb), one welcomes the proposed extension of the Mriehel Bypass into Attard with some caution while waiting to know in greater detail the footprint required and its siting.

While acknowledging the social importance of sports facilities, the ones in the offing "on land adjacent to Mount Carmel Hospital" should be sited closer to the town's centre to prevent further sprawling. No mention is made of the fact that building rubble should be cleared and derelict buildings (uncompleted) should be demolished at the end of Triq il-Pantar.

Credit must be given however for the proposed safeguard of the hallmark gardens in the town and the relocation of large stores from residential areas to Triq il-Pitkali to more amenable sites.

Naxxar

The biggest mistake of the CMLP regarding Naxxar is the proposed embellishment of the boathouse and caravan areas at Bahar ic-Caghaq. Rather than being given patronage, these should be cleared to permit public access to the sea, conserve the ecological integrity of the coastal resources in the area since they constitute eyesores.

If complacency prevails, we cannot avoid having a carbon copy of the Armier and San Tumas faux pas. As outlined by the CMLP, the town has experienced a doubling of its population from 1985 to 1998 - hence the dire need for making the most efficient use of available land in "infill pockets".

Plans to safeguard the rocky coastline from Bahar ic-Caghaq to Salini are highly laudable since this is rapidly degrading due to the illegal installation of concrete pathways, uncontrolled camping activities and rampant dumping in the Qalet Marku peninsula.

The CMLP also proposes opening another access road to the Trade Fair Grounds, effectively sounding the death-knell for the last remaining rural pockets in the area, most of which have already been converted into Trade Fair parking lots.

No mention is made in the CMLP of the siting of small industries within Wied Filep in a prime agricultural site where residents' opposing voices should be heard and where shortcomings such as the siting of boatyards and batching plants should be mitigated rather than emulated.

Gharghur

This village is one of the last rustic havens in our islands mirroring to perfection its original role - a farmers' village housing a mere 2,300 people. Hence, further commercial activity in the village should be curbed.

One cannot but endorse measures to safeguard the ecologically important valleys of Wied Faham, Wied Anglu, Wied Santa Katerina and Wied id-Dis surrounding the village and the proposed Heritage Trail for the site. Madliena should not be allowed to encroach further on the environs of Wied Faham while Busietta Gardens should not be allowed to expand its operations.

Birkirkara

Although there is a dire need for sports facilities in Birkirkara, these should not be located in an ODZ at Ghar il-Gobon as the CMLP is proposing, but rather in an alternative site within the development precincts of the village.

In addition, the residential development recently sprouting up along the Birkirkara bypass should be curbed to focus instead on the rehabilitation of the many vacant buildings in this town.

The various measures proposed so as to control traffic and commercial sprawl are quiet circumspect. In view of the acute flooding problems which plague many parts of Birkirkara every year, any proposals to alleviate this problem in future Local Plan drafts would be most welcome, especially in safeguarding the remaining rural pockets of land on the upper reaches of Msida Valley Road.

Iklin

The siting of large-footprint projects, such as a primary school, within "infill pockets" is a concrete step proposed by the CMLP to stop further urban sprawl.

Another heartening proposal is the rehabilitation of the various quarries and a tarmac plant in the area. However, the number of bungalows in residential areas should be restricted due to their considerable land footprint. The remaining virgin land between Iklin and the Tal-Balal area is still dotted with large numbers of carob trees.

Qormi

Although endeavours to segregate industrial activities from residential areas as proposed in the CMLP are welcome, one would like to see a less profligate use of land within industrial areas, especially behind the Mriehel Industrial Estate on one side of the Mriehel Bypass, where large tracts of land are simply lying idle beneath tons of rubble. One can also augur that the

proposed secondary "town centre" in Mdina Road does not impinge further on rural land in the Ta' Farzina area.

The Central Malta Local Plan makes no mention of the derelict state of a large part of Wied il-Kbir, especially in the wake of ill-fated clean-up efforts by certain government entities, where the valley bed has been literally smothered with large amounts of building debris. The breathtaking views presented by such a valley should be encompassed in a Nature Trail while the valley itself should be scheduled.

St Venera

One cannot but appreciate proposals to mitigate the drop in population experienced in St Venera (formerly known as Hal Kaprat) by giving a facelift to several "sub-standard" buildings found in the locality.

Although one supports the need for a community centre in St Venera, one augurs that its siting at Umberto Calosso School and the subsequent need for a new school do not impinge on the last remaining open spaces in the locality behind Romeo Romano Garden.

Balzan

Proposals to safeguard the hallmark gardens so characteristic of this small locality and of the highly endearing urban environment to be found within the centre of Balzan serve to safeguard the individual character of our towns and villages.

Hamrun

The CMLP aims to bolster the number of parking spaces within Hamrun through an underground parking area and the opening of recreational and sports facilities on the former MDP site.

One must also appreciate efforts to shore up the town's dwindling population (down by 21 per cent from 1985 to 1998) through the revamping of derelict buildings and the restricting of the height of new buildings to four storeys.

For this purpose, a greater degree of natural landscaping in this heavily urbanised environment should be employed to make the locality more endearing. The CMLP also hoards the limelight on education by proposing that more facilities are developed in the Tar-Rabbat area.

Mosta

This locality, due to its rampant development, is the hot potato of the entire Local Plan.

Gargantuan Mosta is looking more and more like a conglomerate of different residential areas emanating away from the town centre. These include Bidnija, Santa Margerita, Ta' Zokrija, Tal-Wej, Ta' Mliit, Tad-Daqqaq, Tas-Sriedak and Il-Blata l-Gholja. Hence, future policies should aim at curbing such a development sprawl and instead help to develop more "infill pockets" within the heart of Mosta rather than encourage the mushrooming of separate residential areas.

Particularly sobering is the situation at Bidnija, Tal-Wej and Ta' Zokrija. At the former site, a former hamlet has now been characterised by luxury properties whose further development should be stopped.

The same measures should be taken at Targa Gap where too much land has already been engulfed by only a handful of sprawling properties - further building of this genre should be strictly curtailed on this island where land is a premium.

Proposals for the development of a new parish centre are looming over Tal-Wej, where the rocky garigue has already been scarred by over-quarrying and dumping. Such an area should be nurtured by the Local Plan.

Plans are also in the offing for the building of a new school at Ta' Zokrija, which has grown from a residential area into almost a new town in itself impinging drastically on the surrounding rural landscape. Its precincts should be controlled and, due to the surrounding countryside, all permitted development should be stringently landscaped. The planned school should not engulf further agricultural land.

Fields stifled with building rubble surrounding Ta' Zokrija and verging on Wied l-Ispersanza should be cleared. The proposed development of commercial centres (dubbed "neighbourhood centres") in this breakaway residential area should also be opposed since these encourage further segregation of building development.

On the other hand, one cannot but fully endorse plans to safeguard the valleys and the Victoria Lines endowing Mosta through the enactment of natural and historical heritage trails.

If at least some of these proposals, put forward by Nature Trust (Malta) and other NGOs in response to the CMLP, are not taken up, Mosta would become a carbon copy of other towns in

our country which have lost their distinct identity, such as Balzan which has simply become part of the Inner Harbour-Centre of Malta urban monologue.

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