

How low can they go?



NO SITE is too sacred for our developers, it seems - an application for a pig farm cheek by jowl with the Nadur Tower, l/o Rabat, and the potable water tanks close by was submitted on Christmas Eve. Will MEPA give due consideration to the locals` concerns?

Usually, the title I have chosen this time is used as a slogan during the January sales. However my intention is to focus on the depths to which DCC members at MEPA can sometimes stoop.

Poor case officer Zammit!... After diligently doing all the trenchwork and expounding in detail to DCC members why the case submitted by Charles Agius should be rejected, the DCC, in what has now become a pattern, has overturned his very valid arguments and granted the permit to convert part of the military barracks into a fully-fledged villa with swimming pool.

One cannot fathom how the DCC board overturned such watertight arguments as:

1. the site lies within a Level 3 area of ecological importance which is earmarked as a buffer zone for the coastal cliff habitats nearby;
2. the site at Ta' Ghar Bittija in Triq it-Turretta lies outside the approved planning scheme for Dingli (i.e. in an ODZ);
3. the military barracks themselves are listed as Grade 2 under Section 2 of the Antiquities Protection Act.

On the other hand, the justification given by the DCC is quite flabbergasting - they reasoned that Agius' application should be given the green light simply because Camilleri's application had been approved a year earlier!

This must surely be setting a dangerous precedent - now anyone with some financial clout can be emboldened to take the step to apply for a villa with swimming pool next to an existing dwelling. If I were to choose, I would pick Gebel Ghawgara above Burmarrad since what was once an illegal building has recently been sanctioned by MEPA - hence, the chances are that they would eventually approve mine too even if it is an ODZ site. I certainly know which architects to engage to get my way.

The DCC board's decision has now opened the floodgates for rampant speculation in Dingli over the stretch of undeveloped land that lies between the village proper and the military barracks. It will be very interesting to see how long it will take before the first application to build a villa in such a zone is submitted to MEPA. Besides, the islands are peppered with former military barracks... is the conversion of the Mistra barracks into villas with swimming pools now on the cards, thanks to the DCC?

Other developers will certainly reason that if Agius and Camilleri saw the light at the end of the tunnel, they should too. And in fact, a third applicant (Robert Farrugia Vella), has now applied to convert part of the barracks into a residence. Ivan Fava, the case officer involved, has rightly argued that the permit should be refused on the following grounds:

1. the site is located within a Level 3 Area of Ecological Importance;
2. the proposed total floor space exceeds the maximum of 150 sq. m set out in the Development Control Guidance: Developments Outside Built-Up Areas;
3. the proposed swimming pool and hard landscaped areas would affect uncommitted land outside the building's original footprint;
4. the proposed development fails to respect the integrity of both the former military barracks and the wider context in which they are located.

To get an inkling of what is meant by 'hard landscaping', just visit the area and you will be confronted by an eyesore perimeter wall, supposedly a 'rubble wall', but which is laced with large franka slabs. How was such a wall ever allowed to be built in such a scenic part of our islands?

Will the DCC have the guts to overturn all the reasons listed above?

It seems that in these islands we feel we must replace any existing structure with another - couldn't the barracks, if they constituted such an eyesore, be demolished and the land eventually restored to its pristine state? In countries like Spain and Croatia, whole coastlines are recovered through massive demolition schemes in a campaign to restore 'the Mediterranean as it once was'. Our development rat-race can only be dubbed 'the Mediterranean as it will be in 100 years'.

The DCC should embark on some soul-searching to answer why its decisions frequently run counter to the very policies it should be upholding.

The continual embarrassment caused to MEPA by the DCC comes hot on the heels on MEPA's inability to carry out its so-called 'Direct Action' against cheeky developers outwitting MEPA on several occasions and still getting off scot-free, as at San Martin and Mgjebah. Against this scenario, what punch is left in the 'Green Window' talks being organised by the MRAE or in any of the other educational initiatives taken by MEPA?

I wonder too how MEPA's director-general, Godwin Cassar, must be feeling, after claiming that MEPA policies are helping to keep urbanisation in check. In the meantime, his colleagues are busy undoing overnight, Penelope-like, everything that MEPA's policies should stand for. One cannot but also feel sympathy for the Astronomical Society of Malta who had once earmarked the site for an astro observatory!

I sincerely appeal to Minister George Pullicino and to any level-headed politicians in this country to pull up their socks and seek to reform MEPA's DCC boards so that these finally start adhering to MEPA policies rather than pandering to the applicant's wishes.

Proposed pig farm next to Nadur Tower

That no site in the Maltese Islands, whatever its ecological, scenic or historical credentials, is immune when it comes to development is well-known. This is again confirmed by the proposed pig farm (PA 05354/04) just a stone's throw from the historical Nadur Tower in Bingemma, I/o Rabat.

Proponents of the project and their advocates, are delighted that the residents' objections did not make it in time to MEPA (i.e. within two weeks of the application), even resorting to calling those who objected to tell them that their objection would not be considered.

I find such behaviour innately flawed for several reasons.

Considering that the pig farm application reached MEPA on December 24, it would have only been fair for MEPA to extend the deadline for objections since you cannot expect people to rack their brains at Christmas. Was it indeed a coincidence that the application was submitted on this date, on the first day that MEPA grinds to a halt for the Christmas recess?

The fact that the proponents of the pig farm are rejoicing over such a trivial detail could mean that they are actually coy about the local residents' valid objections to the project.

Even though the two weeks allowed for objections have contentiously passed, are the residents' valid concerns on drinking water safety, etc., to be ignored?

Residents claim that no application notification sign was posted on site - if this is indeed the case, isn't that too a breach of procedures?

Just in case MEPA actually decides on snubbing the locals' concerns since these were not submitted in time, here is a synopsis of such concerns:

Potable water contamination - the proposed development is situated a few metres from the water tanks known as the Nadur Tanks. These tanks fall under the responsibility of the Water Services Corporation and supply potable water to all the residents of Bahrija, Il-Kunċizzjoni, Mtaħleb, Binemma, Ghemieri, Dwejra, and Dwejra Water Tanks, Mtarfa and Buzugrilla Housing Estate.

The tanks, with a capacity of 11,000 cubic metres, are hewn into the rock, and are supplied with air vents just above the water level. With a pig producing about 12 litres of waste a day and the vicinity of the proposed pig farm to the tanks, the seepage of toxic effluent from the farm into the tanks is highly probable.

Air contamination - pig farms suffuse the air with toxic fumes such as methane, hydrogen sulphide and ammonia and which can be wind-transported over large distances.

Aquifer contamination - the project could adversely affect the potable water quality of whole swathes of the islands due, among other things, to its vantage position. A few natural adjacent springs include Bumahhala (240 metres) and Ghemieri (450 metres), while Nadur borehole (330 metres) are also at great risk of such contamination. In addition, the area is not connected to the public sewer - hence, if the project is approved, one can envisage massive excavation works which could further undermine the site's integrity.

Historical amenity - if approved, the project would certainly mock the recent facelift given to the Nadur Tower, a Grade 1 historical monument. What happened to the approved plans to cordon off the perimeter of the site with a small fence?

Landscape amenity - a pig farm, with long eyesore sheds, is not exactly ideal landscaping. This would impinge negatively on the unhindered skyline to be enjoyed on site, with breathtaking views of the NW coast of the island and its hinterland.

Residential areas - the proposed pig farm is ostensibly just 30 metres away from the nearest residence.

Agricultural land - no guarantees from proponents of the project can ever be enough to ensure that there would not be any leaching of effluent from the pig farm itself on to adjacent agricultural land.

After landmark victories at Wied Garnaw and other sites, MEPA should give civil society a much needed tonic by rejecting such an application outright, especially since the Rabat environs are peppered with pig farms, some of which were greatly expanded in recent areas, as in the Tal-Virtù area.

More wheelings and dealings in Gozo

The planning horseplay witnessed in Malta sometimes pales in comparison with that witnessed on Gozo.

A case in point is the large gaping crater dug out in the road leading to Pjazzetta Arċipriet Dun Martin in Nadur. Residents are in fact livid that the site of the excavation works used to be occupied by a vintage house of historical value, with a well 70 fathoms deep (ca. 140 m) aptly dubbed l-Ispiera ta' Ċensu - the same building was ruthlessly knocked down (presumably during the night, as happens in most cases in Gozo) by its philistine owners.

In addition, while the adjacent Nadur Youngsters Football Club was obliged, about 45 years ago, to give up part of its property to make way for the widening of the street on site "in the public interest", the public interest was certainly not pursued in this case with the excavation works abutting onto the public street. It is inconceivable how the perpetrator of the demolition has still not been brought to book while the authorities in Gozo allow such a blatant colonisation of what should be land for public access.

I have repeatedly lobbied TV and radio stations to have a programme on thorny environmental issues, such as illegal building, sanctioning, etc. and not always on waste management. To date, no one has taken up the challenge - it seems that drooling over the Social Pact is more important than having some free space on this island in which to roam.

Why fight for more public holidays when the last few scenic places one can still visit are being ruined forever? As always, our "wasted youth", who could set houses on fire if they so wished, are too engrossed in technological gadgets to care.

Silver linings

In just one year HSBC's Internet Banking service has resulted in a dramatic reduction in the quantity of paper used by the bank. Since its launch on January 21, 2004, more than 19,000

HSBC Malta customers have decided to stop receiving printed statements and advices at home by post and are instead reviewing their statements from HSBC's Internet Banking site. As a result, in December 2004 alone, an estimated 41,500 sheets of A4 paper, weighing some 220 kg, were saved.

In addition to the sheets of paper, a corresponding number of envelopes, weighing about 150 kg, were also saved. HSBC anticipates that in 2005, more than 500,000 sheets of paper with their corresponding envelopes, together weighing some 4,500 kg, will be saved.

Appreciation

A word of appreciation goes to the late Fr Charles Caruana, SJ, who was an environmentalist at heart and who was always ready to give good advice in times of need.

deidunfever@yahoo.co.uk