

Ten wishes for 2017



Why is a real estate agency interested in opening a souvenir shop in an inaccessible part of Hondoq ir-Rummien?

It's that time of the year when slates are wiped clean and resolutions and aspirations for the coming months are the order of the day. The following 10 wishes for 2017 might be seen as tall orders, but as they say, hope springs eternal...

1. Planning Commission – A considerable number of planning applications in Outside Development Zone (ODZ) areas are being waved through by the Planning Commission rather than by the Planning Board. The latter has a more representative composition, whereas NGOs are not represented on the Planning Commission, which is dominated by architects.

The most frequent justification given for this phenomenon is that the Planning Board cannot handle the large volume of ODZ planning applications. Rather than shifting the burden of all piecemeal ODZ planning applications to the Planning Board, the composition of the Planning Commission must be revised. This probably necessitates a lengthy legal process and hence will never see the light of day.

2. Bird trapping – Bird trapping in sensitive sites should be effectively prohibited. It is irrelevant whether the sites are Natura 2000 or not.

3. Enforcement at sea – If enforcement on land is a damp squib, it is practically non-existent at sea, as can be attested by people constantly reporting cases of poaching (e.g. of tuna by sports fishermen, and of edible sea urchins and date mussels by with scuba divers).

4. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) – The implementation of management measures in the Maltese islands' MPAs is still a mirage.

5. Development boundaries – There should be no enlargement of the current development boundaries once the revised local plans are published.

6. Land ownership – The publication of the definite guide to ownership of land in the Maltese islands so as to avoid further angst to ramblers and more land grabs by squatters.

7. Land reclamation – The proposal to permit land reclamation for commercial purposes should be ditched.

8. Ta' Ċenċ – The ongoing efforts to get approval for the further development of Ta' Ċenċ, including the building of 15 villas, an interpretation centre and an extension of the existing hotel, should continue to be frustrated.

9. A renewed afforestation effort

10. Less political interference in the development and planning process – This is probably the tallest order of them all.

Commercialisation plans for Hondoq?

One of the most iconic environmental struggles in these islands in the recent past has revolved around Hondoq ir-Rummien, with a 15-year-long saga supposedly coming to an end last July with the Planning Authority expressing itself against the proposed development.

Although the bay seems to have been spared the brunt of large-scale development, it still seems alluring enough to piecemeal development, such as the one proposing the conversion of an existing agricultural store (already extended in 1994, contrary to the case officer's recommendation) into a souvenir shop.

So far, no cause to raise one's eyebrows, one might say, especially considering that the same footprint will be retained. What might potentially be cause for concern, however, is that the company behind the proposal – AAC Ltd – is fully owned by Ta' Frenċ Estate Agents, and the ancillary works being proposed, which include timber paving around the souvenir shop and a rubble wall.

Considering that certain notorious developments in these islands start with small rooms morphing into fully-fledged residences, my cynicism in this case is legitimate...

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- Why is a real estate company interested in opening up a souvenir shop in a backwoods part of Gozo, accessible only through a narrow road meandering round the coastline?
- Will the souvenir shop increase demand for parking facilities on site, with this being met through more informal parking on the rocky coastline on site?
- And what exactly is the scope of the timber paving – outdoor catering perhaps?

Phasing out diesel cars?

It might have just caused a minor ripple for the time being, but the decision by the mayors of four major cities (Paris, Mexico City, Athens and Madrid) to ban diesel engines from their cities by 2025 (and, at the same time, to promote hybrid, hydrogen and electric car uptake) has the potential to be a game-changer.

The decision, taken in Mexico last month at the biennial meeting of city leaders, is motivated by the higher level of concern over air pollution due to the use of diesel as compared to petrol.

Diesel, in fact, is the evil twin of petrol in more ways than one; Its combustion belches more nitrogen oxides (NOx, responsible for a higher incidence of respiratory problems and cardiovascular disease) and particulate matter (fine dust) into the atmosphere, and spews out only marginally lower carbon emissions than petrol.

Despite diesel engines being more efficient than petrol ones, the former are generally bulkier than petrol ones, and diesel has a higher carbon content than petrol, thus wiping one most of the reduction in carbon emissions that diesel engines might bring about.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), last year alone, the deaths of three million people globally, including 467,000 in Europe, was directly caused by exposure to outdoor pollution.

Car manufacturers have their eyes peeled on the next move, which might trigger a mass exodus towards petrol cars in future.



Will 2017 finally see an end to all aspirations to further develop Ta' Ċenċ?