

Damning report on Works Division

Minister Ninu Zammit must certainly have cringed if he read the report by MEPA's Audit Office regarding the roughshod work conducted by his team on the Wied Babu promenade. Such a report (2006/081) was drafted after Annalise Falzon (on behalf of Nature Trust) filed a complaint with the same office on August 21 concerning the "upgrading of existing walkway from Nigret to Wied iz-Zurrieq" (PA 2673/04).

Excerpts from the report are certainly damning for the Works Division. Quoting from its conclusions:

"The situation described above indicates, regrettably, an all too common experience where a developer, completely and totally insensitive to the environment (in this case the Works Division) wants at all costs to carry out a development likely to cause severe damage to this environment.

"The initial plans as submitted to the MEPA are shocking. It is unbelievable that a Government Department, with all the resources available to it, should come up with such a project. The submitted plans show a holiday resort-type of promenade, which may have been acceptable say, on the Bugibba waterfront, but definitely not in the area it was being planned.

"It is to be noted that although the development was to be located in a highly sensitive area, no study was presented with the application to indicate the effects of this development on the whole locality, in particular on the natural environment. I would have expected that a development of this nature would have been accompanied by a detailed study to ascertain whether this project could be considered feasible in economic, environmental and technical terms and the MEPA should have insisted on such a document.

"How is it possible to make a reasonable and valid assessment of such an application without knowing why the development was so important, as to risk the environmental damage? It is difficult to envisage the economic returns (or even the amenity value) of this project. People who visit the place are likely to desire the quiet and tranquil environment of the promenade. The environmental aspects of the project were not even considered by the applicant. The applicant knew, or should have known (it has ample resources at its disposal) of the sensitivity of the location. Yet it simply did not care. The way works were carried out further confirms this.

"What were the real reasons for the application? To upgrade the access to Wied iz-Zurrieq (but no Traffic Impact Statement was ever presented)? To create an ostentatious project as a public relations exercise? The latter is the most likely when the history of the application is considered after perusing the file documents."

"Public relations exercise" - hats off to the Audit Office for having the tenacity to spell this out. Such reported misdemeanours do not bode well for future projects in sensitive areas to be entrusted to the same division - it would be a good idea to ensure the presence of an environmental monitoring team in all of the division's future workings since it is evident (as spelled out by MEPA's own Audit Officer) that the Works Division is being insensitive to environmental considerations. One hopes that this report does not fall on deaf ears since it has certainly created a precedent.

Ta' Cenc - subtle threat

Victor Borg has finally decided to regale readers with his views ("Ta' Cenc is private property", The Sunday Times, November 12). In his contribution he makes a subtle threat: "The privately owned property of Ta' Cenc would remain a 'no-go area' and access will be at the discretion of the owners, only if the proposed project does not go through". Hence, should we start clamouring for the project to go ahead since otherwise we face the prospect of being unable to visit Ta' Cenc?

Mr Borg seeks to condone the fencing off of the area to two successive visits by bona fide individuals to the site, stating that "war drums and placards" had been employed by those present. He must surely know that his plans for Ta' Cenc are the reason why genuine

environmentalists are so angry, since they can see through the glossy Heritage Park jargon and discern more proposed construction.

Had he not mobilised the police force in such strength on August 14, 2005, to cordon off his area, then the prevailing mood among visitors would have been different - Mr Borg is shooting himself in the foot. He must have a detailed account of all those present on that ill-fated day last year - the gathering included academics, members of NGOs, members of the public (including families, with children), etc - quite a mellow crowd.

It's quite galling that Mr Borg chooses to quote from the Gozo and Comino Local Plan and to cherry-pick sections from it. He should have quoted also from the Structure Plan or other sections of the Local Plan, which clearly run counter to some of his proposals.

According to government policy TOU 10, "the height of buildings (at Ta' Cenc) will be restricted to one and two storeys with the exception of traditional taller features such as stone built windmills, lookout towers, domes and spires". How does that fit in with the application to build a three-storey hotel and three-storey residential units?

According to GZ-Snat-2, the Gozo Local Plan from 2002, MEPA shall "encourage the upgrading of the existing facilities near the existing (Ta' Cenc) hotel provided... (it is) sufficiently away from the northern escarpment". How does that fit in with the application to build bungalows right along the northern escarpment?

Again according to GZ-Snat-2, "(there shall be) a pedestrian path... running parallel to the northern carriageway route which links the hotel to the villa area for free and unhindered public access". How can there be "free and unhindered public access" if it is closed at night, as the developer plans?

Mr Borg ends by saying that RealFinanz apologises "to all those who genuinely care about the well-being of the Gozitan population and the Gozitan natural environment, and who do not harbour any ulterior motives" - let the public in general gauge whether it's meant NGOs like Din l-Art Helwa which have ulterior motives or the developer, seeking to get approval for a project that will alter the landscape at Ta' Cenc forever. I am ready to engage Mr Borg in a public debate, if necessary, to sustain my arguments.

Benefits of scheme revision

Hardly has the dust settled on the controversial scheme revision exercise that the first would-be beneficiaries are clamouring for their dividend. PA 06485/06 refers to the erection of basement garages, commercial centre and 118 apartments at Msida, in a previously ODZ area, on the side of a valley regularly prone to severe flooding.

Will the developer compensate all the Msida residents and motorists who find themselves having to deal with torrents of water after rainy spells? Why was there no mention of the protected carob trees to be found on sifa made in the application, which should read "To cut down carob trees, erect garages, etc".

Hunting again

During a recent Bondi+ programme on TVM, Lino Farrugia, secretary of the Hunters and Trappers' Federation (FKNK) revealed the contents of a despicable e-mail received on the association's Internet forum, in which a correspondent made some inane statements worthy of a street brawl to the extent of wishing death to all hunters and injury to their offspring.

Such outbursts should be condemned without reservation, whatever their provenance, since they abet the deep divide between hunters and bird lovers.

On another note, however, I also condemn the claim (if true, that is) that someone from the FKNK asked the correspondent in the same forum for his home address - such puerile intimidation tactics must be buried forever.

I am still perplexed as to why the FKNK does little to shake off its tarnished public image, especially as this requires little effort. For example, why doesn't the FKNK not condemn the recent osprey shooting out at sea, carried out in full view of an AFM patrol in broad daylight? The fact that a protected bird needs an AFM escort and that flouting of hunting laws is so rampant beggars belief.

If the FKNK condemns similar actions in future, I would be the first to commend it. Could it be that the FKNK fears retribution from its members if it speaks out against hunting offences? Through its silence, the FKNK is perpetrating an even greater injustice - this time, with the majority of law-abiding hunters.

Another recommendation from my part is that the FKNK stops being so impetuous in rebutting reports of illegal shooting - despite its claims, offences unfortunately are still the order of the day, albeit by a minority of hunters. How, for example, can one otherwise explain the recant

seizure of close to 100 specially protected birds from Zebbug and Birzebbuga? One hopes that fines in such cases will be commensurate - i.e. a fine running into thousands of liri.

Fait accompli at Ta' Qali

Many expedients exist when it comes to the tortuous process of seeking approval for proposed development. One of these is to present decision-taking boards at MEPA with a fait accompli - the recently approved Convention Centre at Ta Qali is a case in point. Such a development (PA 02192/06) was only approved on November 1, while the Andrea Bocelli concert, scheduled to be held there on December 16, was publicised (along with the venue, still to be approved) as from mid-October, a full two weeks before (giving quite some leverage to proponents of development)!

Does any level-headed individual imagine MEPA refusing planning permission in such a case? Proponents would have rebutted that that would have derailed plans to bring over a great star to Malta, which would in turn have a multiplier effect on the economy, etc.

Silver linings

Turtle release - Eleven loggerhead turtles have been released by the Malta Fisheries and Aquaculture Centre at San Lucjan, in conjunction with MRAE and MEPA. The centre caters for the rehabilitation of injured turtles received from NGO's, fishermen, etc.

The only flaw is the fact the whole event was hijacked by an NGO, BICREF, which featured exclusively in The Times reporting on the event, despite the NGO's leading exponent not being present that day and not having any role in the turtle-rescue/rehabilitation process.

Climate change student participation - Over 200 Form II students are currently participating in the second phase of the nationwide campaign on climate change launched in schools this month. The aim of the campaign, "You Control Climate Change", is to raise awareness among young people about climate change and about individual and collective responsibilities towards the environment.

Eight classes of secondary students studying environmental science, from a number of government, Church and private schools, have made a pledge to make small changes in their daily habits and keep track of their efforts to combat climate change. These include switching off unnecessary electrical appliances, switching off the TV rather than leaving it on standby, recycling waste and walking instead of using fuel powered transport.

The participating schools are St Augustine's College, Marija Regina, Dun Guzepp Brighella, St Benedict's College, Margaret Mortimer, St Monica, Sir Temi Zammit and San Andrea.

This EU-wide initiative forms part of an overall campaign about climate change launched a few months ago by the European Commission. Educational material is available on the campaign's Website www.climatechange.eu.com, and includes brochures, Podcasts, a carbon calculator, and short films which can all be used during class discussion.

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