

ODZ hype



San Lawrenz - villages merging to form one conurbation: seen opposite is the hamlet of San Ġużepp (Għarb), separated by a narrow buffer from San Lawrenz, which is where the photo was taken.

Outside Development Zone (ODZ) appears to be the fashionable term at the moment. Most of the views expressed on the subject so far have rightly underscored the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's responsibilities in fuelling the current ODZ hype by approving certain applications that fall into this category.

However, few, if any, correspondents have mused over the shared responsibilities of the applicant. After all, he or she is the one who sets the ball rolling by vying for ODZ sites in the first place.

And while admonishing those responsible for the ODZ abuse is laudable, one should also consider what one would do if presented with the same circumstances. My gut feeling is that the penchant for an exclusive dwelling is so mouth-watering to the Maltese ethos that most locals would not give a second thought to developing an ODZ site.

A popular avenue is to forge ahead with the works and then to apply for sanctioning at a later stage. This reality is sobering indeed since it implies that the drive to develop ODZs is much more insidious than one might think, and is not limited to the construction tycoon as we might be tempted to think. And the political pressure to expand development zones further will never abate.

Last month alone, some 320 planning applications were submitted to Mepa, of which 80 donned the ODZ robe. This accounts for a staggering 25 per cent of the total applications submitted.

Furthermore, from these applications it is noticeable that:

- 20 (or 25 per cent) refer to alterations and/or additions to existing non-residential properties (including farms, quarries, playgrounds, etc)
- 21 (or 26 per cent) refer to alterations and/or additions to existing residential properties (including swimming pool development, etc)
- 18 (or 22.5 per cent) refer to the proposed sanctioning of infringements
- 21 (or 26 per cent) refer to the proposed development of pristine/new ODZ sites

The latter type, which I consider to be the worst, include:

- the proposed construction of a dwelling and garage at Triq il-Fanal, Ghasri (PA 07207/07)
- the proposed construction of a new dwelling at Hal Tartarini, Dingli (PA 07390/07)
- the proposed construction of a dwelling, garage and swimming pool at Triq Ghajn Tuta, Kerċem (PA 07496/07)
- the proposed construction of basement garages and flats at Triq it-Tempju, Qala (PA 07501/07)
- the proposed construction of three stables at Ta' Gawhar, Safi (PA 07059/07)
- the proposed construction of an agricultural store at Ġnien is-Sultan, Zabbar (PA 06881/07)
- the proposed development of a tool room, at ta' l-Għarix, Qrendi (PA 03061/07), despite the applicant having ploughed ahead with the illegal erection of a boundary wall
- the proposed construction of dwellings and underlying garages at Labour Avenue, Zabbar (PA 07034/07)
- the proposed construction of an agricultural store at Triq Mikieljanġ Sapiano, Żebbuġ (PA 07366/07)
- the proposed construction of a new dwelling at Limbordin, l/o St. Paul's Bay (PA 08942/07)
- the proposed construction of a new dwelling at Bieb ir-Ruwa, l/o Rabat (PA 07198/07)
- the proposed construction of a new dwelling at Triq in-Nigret, Rabat (PA 06996/07)
- the proposed construction of an agricultural store at Triq ix-Xierref, Dingli (PA 07291/07)
- the proposed development of a showroom and stores at first floor level at Triq il-Gudja, Gudja (PA 07167/07)

Worth noting is: the disproportionate number of applications for agricultural stores, especially at a time when revenue for Maltese farmers, according to an EU Commission report, has declined slightly over the last year; the high number of dwelling applications, as if the local property market was not already saturated with vacant properties; and the onslaught on quaint little hamlets, such as Limbordin, Hal Tartarini, and Gozitan villages.

If Parliament had enacted the amendments tabled by Environment Minister George Pullicino some months ago, such ODZ applications would not even be up for discussion.

One hopes that Mepa does not attempt to use the lack of third party objections to justify the approval of ODZ projects, as happened in the case of the Polidano supermarket in Safi, as environmentalists have a life to live as well, besides rummaging for hours through the Mepa website.

2008 wishlist/continued

This is the sequel to the first part of the comprehensive wishlist for 2008, published last week:

10. That adjacent towns and villages are not joined together into one large conurbation. Otherwise, phrases such as 'I hail from Mġarr', will become redundant, only to be outdone by 'I hail from the Maltese metropolis'. A case in point are two ODZ applications at San Lawrenz which, if approved, will encroach further onto the green buffer separating the village from the hamlet of San Ġużepp in Għarb.
11. That conflicts of interest are identified without the need for a public outcry
12. That there is a clamp-down on the blatant felling of mature trees by contractors who are hell-bent on selling logs for fireplaces (most recent cases: Hal Tmiem, Żejtun and main road in Żebbuġ)
13. That someone ensures that site notices are not displayed for just a few hours to thwart potential objectors
14. That funds allocated for the safeguarding of the environment are not bundled with those destined for road resurfacing and other unrelated projects
15. That sustainability is not a matter of lip service - for example, approved dwellings should have a designated buyer prior to their construction so that they do not end up boosting the number of 'vacant dwellings' and, probably the biggest wish of all, that the environment is not used for the sake of political capital.