

Putting the cart before the horse



An aerial shot of the coastal stretch between Xghajra and Marsascala, part of which is earmarked for the American University development. Photo courtesy of www.airphotomalta.com

The proposed nine-hectare (equivalent to 12 full-size football pitches) American University in an Outside Development Zone area in Żonqor has understandably raised the bristles of many, not just of environmentalists, but also of level-headed politicians like Labour MP Marlene Farrugia and Marsascala deputy mayor Desiree Attard.

The case smacks of the pre-Mepa era when decisions were made without the necessary site selection and environment impact assessment (EIA) studies being conducted. If the assertion that the ODZ site at Żonqor was rubber-stamped by the Mepa CEO himself, then this rings hollow for two reasons.

Firstly, it is inconceivable how the CEO of an authority which, according to its own mission statement, professes to safeguard the country's natural resources for future generations, can opt for an undeveloped ODZ site that is located within a designated nature reserve, to boot. It seems more like Johann Buttigieg has ended up as the sacrificial lamb.

Secondly, if it is true that Mepa has conducted an exhaustive site selection process, then a report with the findings of the process should be released and published so that the public can gather which and how other alternative sites were assessed for their suitability or otherwise to house the university campus.

Such comprehensive site selection processes are the order of the day nowadays and the Labour Party rightly kicked up a fuss when it claimed that the site selection process for the development of the Sant'Antnin recycling plant was biased in favour of the chosen site from the very start – in other words, that the dice was loaded.

The mind boggles as to what will happen if the conclusions of the commissioned EIA study identify major negative impacts so as to render the project unacceptable from an

environmental point of view. Would the current fait accompli give way to a U-turn, namely would the government comply fully with such an EIA's conclusions, as Joseph Muscat has pledged to do, or are the conclusions of the EIA already a foregone affair?

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The confidence shown by the Mepa CEO and by the government in stating that Żonqor is the best site without any form of impact study having been conducted is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse, assuming they don't have a crystal ball to which to resort....

I genuinely feel sympathy for Environment Minister Leo Brincat, who has been obliged to rubber-stamp the proposed development, even though this entails a massive uptake of ODZ land. In a hastily-scrambled press conference at the Ta' Barkat sewage treatment plant, Brincat, along with two other ministers, strived to justify the need for this uptake of land, drawing

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parallels, as Muscat himself had done earlier in the week, with the need for the sewage treatment plant.

One gets the impression that Brincat has so far managed to suppress the urge to speak against such a project, as was the case for the approved revisions of ODZ policies, the draft Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development, the proposed fireworks factory regulations and a whole host of other revised environmental policies.

Will he finally assume the role of environment minister – which, as he knows, does not only comprise writing articles on climate change and waste reduction – when it comes to the much-anticipated revision of the local plans? I sincerely hope so, but I'm not holding my breath. The revision is set to happen in the coming months. It will probably bring about an enlargement of the development boundaries.

The Nationalist Party is right in denouncing the ODZ siting of the American University. However, one of the ways in which the party can dispel suspicion that its simply jumping on the environmentalist bandwagon when in Opposition, is if it pledges never again to extend the development boundaries, as it did in 2006, and that it will never embark on such gargantuan ODZ projects when it returns to power.

Political parties have a knack of shedding their noble principles when in power, resulting in voter cynicism.