

## Aviation park concerns



The environmental and social impacts of the proposed aviation park on Safi and Kirkop residents are hardly being considered.

The euphoria over the expansion of aircraft-servicing facilities at Safi is well justified considering its economic and employment contribution.

SR Technics alone is pledging to employ 350 staff by 2014. However, the recently-approved expansion of the aviation park in Safi to accommodate an SR Technics maintenance hangar is massive (20 hectares - 180 tumoli) and any environmental considerations seem to have been steamrolled over.

Developments within the airport precincts are not subject to the customary red tape but necessitate a simple development notification order (DNO), normally the preserve of balcony restorations or internal alterations within residences. Again, such a protocol is justified in terms of time constraints, since competition in the aviation industry is cutthroat and operates within stringent timelines.

The 20-hectare extension was approved within four days by virtue of a simple DNO. The wisdom of approving such massive projects through flimsy DNOs is debatable, as exemplified by last week's finding of archaeological remains on the site accommodating the new Medavia hangar. Developments extending beyond the airport boundaries must certainly be subject to greater scrutiny, especially when these involve encroaching on fertile agricultural land and the uprooting of carob and olive trees.

In fact, the less palatable aspects of the project include a major impact on the Safi environment, involving a number of part-time farmers of a livestock farm having to cease their agricultural activity and a small number of carob and olive trees and vineyards being obliterated.

The social impact promises to be even more insidious. The currently uncluttered access to the tranquil village of Safi will have to meander through a former airplane taxiway and Armed Forces barracks which will also have to be relocated.

Hopefully, the economic windfall of the proposed gargantuan aviation park will not induce a condescending stance towards the project's significant environmental and social impact.

### State of the Environment report

In line with the Aarhus Convention, the Environment Protection Act and other related conventions which promote public access to environmental information, Mepa published its fourth State of the Environment (SoE) report, albeit two years late.

In addition to its usual summaries about various environmental indicators, one gets the impression that the 2008 report is more enterprising when it comes to underlining the importance of the natural environment for the country. In fact, the report acknowledges that one-fifth of local employment and one-sixth of value added depends on the exploitation of the natural environment.

While I do not fully subscribe to the idea of attaching economic justification to the ecosystem, I assume that such justifications work wonders with policymakers, for whom the report is

ultimately intended.

Yet another bold statement in the report is that the country needs to decouple economic growth from energy demand, which is holding the country back from attaining its renewable energy and energy efficiency targets.

According to Eurostat, the Maltese economy is energy-exorbitant, ranking 10th in Europe in terms of the ratio of gross energy consumption to GDP. This means Malta's economy guzzles up more kilowatts of energy per €1,000 of GDP than 17 other EU member states, including countries traditionally considered as powerhouses of heavy industry, such as Germany, Italy and the UK.

Three of the most sobering statistics included in the report refer to quarrying, total number of vehicles, and the total number of vacant buildings.

Despite the total number of quarries stabilising, the overall footprint encompassed by quarries leapfrogged to over 2.5 square kilometres in 2008. This is equivalent to over 350 full-size football pitches or Malta's largest natural park - the Majjistral.

The total number of vehicles, after somewhat tailing off during the 2003-2005 period, resumed its rapid climb, and by 2008 almost 300,000 vehicles had been registered locally, equivalent to almost 0.75 vehicles per capita.

To cap it all, by 2008 the total number of vacant buildings had spiralled to a mesmerising 53,136, or 27.6 per cent of the total housing stock, despite the 2005 report warning that permits granted were far outstripping demand. Is this a sign of things to come, i.e. that the report just published will go unheeded and be shelved like the 2005 one?

The rub in it all is that a significant number of the vacant buildings are permanently empty residences, which increased by a whopping 90 per cent over the 1995-2005 period, and of which second homes constitute a miniscule fraction.

The bottom line is that our building stone and land are at the mercy of property speculators, despite the GDP contribution of the construction sector dipping slightly over the 2005-2008 period, although investment in property certainly did not wane.

In fact, in what must be one of its most compelling statements, the 2008 SoE report asserts that the accumulated value of vacant properties amounts to over a third of the country's total savings - i.e. property is still perceived as a good investment in our over-developed island.

The report's policy responses section floats a very telling statistic - the government's total environmental expenditure. In 2007, this expenditure amounted to around €81.8 million, or 1.5 per cent of the country's GDP. While this is still lower than that of many other European countries, it is more palatable when seen on a per capita basis.

In fact, while €205 was spent on the local environment for every Maltese citizen, the equivalent figures for Germany and Italy were €209 and €135, respectively. While Austria, with its €658 per capita, splurged on the environment, the wooden spoon went to Portugal and Bulgaria, which forked out a measly €0.7 and €0.8 per capita on the environment.

However, the local environmental expenditure statistic was in stark contrast to the European average in terms of its composition. In fact, while 90 per cent of the €81.8m devoted to the environment was spent on waste management, including wastewater treatment, the corresponding average for Europe is 35 per cent.

This discrepancy suggests the country still needs to spend much more on other environmental sectors, including biodiversity, environmental enforcement and site management.