

Not so 'green' school applications

The saga over a proposed new St Michael's Foundation school at Tal-Balal, San Gwann, is laced with more facts than has been reported in the press, which has chosen to hover mainly on the parents' and students' plight rather than digging deep down for the facts. The cons of the project are:

▫ the site, granted by Parliamentary resolution in 1997, is not that amenable for a salutary school environment, being hemmed in as it is by two batching plants and a quarry. Are parents aware of such neighbours?

▫ with at least one full-time farming family on site, how did Parliament in 1997 decide with one fell swoop to give the full swathe of land to the foundation? So much for the Rural Development Plan we brag about!

▫ the project envisages the uprooting of ca. 3,000 six-year-old vines spanning over ca. 8 tumoli (roughly 1 ha.) of land. Do the developers, MEPA and parents alike think that this is congruous with Malta's efforts to plant 1,000 ha. of vines all over the islands or with the recent two-year transitory period derogation obtained from the EU for local wine-makers? And what about the millions of litres of valuable fresh water that the six-year-old vines have received over the years? If only the farmer knew what was in the offing, surely he would not have toiled so much to plant the vines.

▫ the ecology part of the EIA fails to identify two important tree species present on site - i.e. *Pistacia terebinthus* (Skornabekk), a very rare, critically endangered species, confined to just one other site (i.e. Tal-Bloq, l/o Qormi), which is protected in Schedule 1 (Part A - Strictly Protected Trees) of the Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations (LN 12 of 2001) and *Crataegus ruscinonesis* which is also listed in the Red Data Book and protected under similar legislation. This underlines the difficulty faced by people compiling ecology reports in EIAs who are often tied with highly stringent deadlines, which restrict sampling to just one season - one reason why the *P. terebinthus* was initially misidentified could be that sampling was done in a non-flowering period of the tree and flowers are one of the prime aids in identifying flora. In the rat race for development, different tree species are put in the same kettle, irrespective of their ecological importance. Besides *Crataegus*, the site is endowed with at least 15 *P. terebinthus* and a good number of often downtrodden carob trees.

▫ the baffling intransigency of developers who, when asked by MEPA to reduce the size of the development so as not to compromise the maquis assemblage, accepted only after much haggling and even objected to the 5m buffer zone around the development which is the minimum requested by planning laws - such a buffer zone should be augmented even further since it's difficult to conceive how 5 m can prevent human disturbance from spilling out from the school and the maquis should be urgently scheduled as an SSI (Site of Scientific Interest), AEI (Area of Ecological Importance) and SAC (Special Area of Conservation).

▫ the site also poorly caters for the upsurge in local traffic that is expected to result from the planned school, with narrow access roads and acute angles acting as hidden menaces to schoolchildren and motorists alike.

Despite the gamut of cons of the project, other proposed sites are even less congenial due to their ecological sensitivity and include T'Alla W Ommu, Pembroke, Gharghur and Ta' Qali/Mosta environs.

In fact, a Structure Plan policy states that any major project, including a school one, should be sited in ODZ sites. Notwithstanding this, however, there is a myriad of degraded land sites away from residential areas that could have been earmarked - predictably, these would have been refuted by the developers in view of the added costs of having to rehabilitate the site and due to the predilection of parents to have the school as close as possible to the Sliema-Pembroke-St Julian's area.

The developers' lawyer, Dr Mario de Marco, in his impassioned appeal to get the project off the ground, stated that priorities should be kept in mind and that another academic year should not be messed up. The 3,000 vines need to be uprooted in the cold winter months of January and February and not now to enable their effective replanting in a new site - will the developers also object to this in view of their hectic timeframes? They should be tied with a bank guarantee so ensure that the vines do not end up shrivelled up in some degraded land.

Dr de Marco's plea is tantamount to saying that the environment is not a priority to the school's developers against the backdrop of the fast approaching June 5 (World Environment Day) and the Eco-School initiative and that for every budding six and seven-year-old, a school must be

built not to mess up another academic year - this infatuation of parents to send their offspring to a particular school will cost us dearly in terms of land use, among others.