

A dream too far?

Birkirkara - Green Capital?



Some of the most inspiring places in Malta are unscrupulously cordoned off by squatters - calls by Ramblers to return public land to its fall on deaf ears.

News about Europe's first Green capitals did not get as much coverage as it deserved. Stockholm and Hamburg have been designated as the European Green Capitals for 2010 and 2011, respectively, in recognition of their consistent records of high environmental standards and strong commitment to further improvement.

Out of 35 applicants across Europe, eight strong candidates were shortlisted: Amsterdam, Bristol, Copenhagen, Freiburg, Hamburg, Münster, Oslo and Stockholm. Applications for the 2012 title will open in September 2009. Shouldn't Malta harbour some aspirations in this sense?

The eligibility criteria for the award stipulate that a city must house at least 200,000 residents. In countries where cities are smaller, an exception is made and the largest urban centre on the island is considered.

In spite of not being a juggernaut, with a population of circa 25,000 residents, Birkirkara holds top spot with regard to size and, theoretically, should be Malta's pick for the award.

Perhaps the whole of Gozo could also qualify as our most populated urban area, and this initiative would frame itself perfectly within the 'ecological island' concept.

Applicant cities should provide detailed information on their current environmental status and results achieved, measures implemented to improve the urban environment, future commitments and initiatives, and the programme of activities and events to disseminate experience and best practice on environmental matters.

With four out of every five European citizens living in urban areas, cities should become one of the next environmental 'battlefields'.

Are green economics possible?

A recent publication by the European Environmental Agency hits the nail on the head when it said: "It has been estimated that the 20/20/20 package (i.e. cutting greenhouse emissions to 20 per cent of 1990 levels, increasing energy efficiency by 20 per cent and reducing energy consumption by 20 per cent) will cut the cost of meeting EU air pollution targets by €8.5 billion annually. The savings to the European health services could be as much as six times that figure."

The gist of all this is that, at the end of the day, it pays to be green. The recent hype surrounding the eco tax on plastic bags could do with some of this wisdom. While everyone concedes that plastic bags should be eliminated from the loop due to their environmental impact, there is opposition to the way the eco-tax was introduced.

The debate is not exclusive to Malta. In the US, several cities are consumed by it. The American Chemistry Council forked out over \$180,000 to fight a ban imposed on the use of plastic bags in the city of Seattle. In the UK, supermarket giant Tesco is stubbornly opposing a nationwide ban on plastic bags.

Let's use this as an opportunity to dialogue and to improve the system, since the environment and economic considerations do not need to cross swords on every occasion. We should be discussing how to fine-tune the system so that it does not become a financial burden, rather than questioning the need for such a ban.

Community space for recreation

The development of multi-level blocks of garages and maisonettes is proposed in Bahrija. The proposal does not fall within an Outside Development Zone area. But this does not mean we can proceed with irresponsible development.

The site in question is hemmed in from all sides by development, just a stone's throw away from the church parvis. The grapevine has it that residents were promised that at least part of the site would be converted into a managed open space, such as a garden or playground. If this is true, the same line should be adhered to and at least a narrow sliver of the site should remain undeveloped and left for community purposes.

Dredging at Birzebbuga

Mepa's recent approval of dredging activities within Marsaxlokk Bay has stirred a hornet's nest in Birzebbuga. Dredging will further reduce water quality in the area. Arguments to the effect that the sea there is already polluted are unacceptable because they are demeaning to Birzebbuga and Marsaxlokk residents and because they imply that the towel has been thrown in.

The Freeport should at least show a modicum of corporate responsibility by financing measures to minimise the impact, such as the extensive use of silt curtains.

Local councils should be updated on the results of the monitoring of bathing water quality, and financial guarantees should be forfeited if pre-set standards are not adhered to; such money should then be spent on the community.

Locals recall how they used to wade out in a few feet of water and catch octopus at Marsaxlokk - those days are long gone, mainly due to dredging activities. Let's try to make future development contributes to rectifying some of the past damage.

Dr Deidun's column will not appear again until after the European Parliament elections in June since he is standing as a candidate.