

More on Hondoq

Proponents of mega-projects have hoards of cash to splash around, and all kinds of studies are commissioned in their efforts to obtain the much-desired permit. However, one study which proponents would gladly do without is that on a project's economic feasibility one, which should dispel any doubts regarding the need for the project and its long-term viability.

As for the recent golf course craze, the Qala Creek proposals do not seem to be backed by any audit feasibility studies - what if the developers jump onto the bandwagon once the project is given the go-ahead and develop the area entirely into luxury apartments, citing economic failure, as has happened with the San Lawrenz Hotel, Chambray, L-Imgarr Hotel, etc? The proponents of the project should prove me wrong and publish the results of such studies, for public scrutiny.

Qala council's response to the project this time round appears to be a whimper compared to the roar four years back, although, to be fair, its submissions to MEPA on the project make many valid points. The following is the gist of the local council's submission (QLC/MEPA/5/2006):

Proposed hotel should be on a smaller scale.

Proposed numbers of self-catering villas and multi-ownership units should be watered down (since the total residents of the global number of new residences is almost double the population of Qala).

Reservations were expressed regarding the impact of the proposed yacht marina on the existing marine life and bathing water quality and who will shoulder the responsibility of enforcing marina regulations.

Hondoq ir-Rummien beach should remain in the public domain, extended up to the existing toilets through the use of suitable sand, and enhanced with the planting of palms.

A new road be opened at Ta' Bamberin, as a shortcut to Zewwieqa Bay, to allay the passage of the envisaged 120 daily truckloads through Qala, with the excavated waste being loaded upon barges and shipped away.

While such proposals are clearly valid, the local council has provided the developer with an olive branch by stating that any planning gain from the project should be channelled towards the construction of all or part of the proposed leisure park/sports complex in Qala (PA01303/05), that people from Qala should be preferred when employing staff, that a barbecue area should be created within the site, that bathing water quality monitoring should be conducted by the operator (daily in summer and weekly in winter) and that the number of parking spaces earmarked for Qala residents should increase from 90 to 120.

The local council should support the wishes of the majority of Qala residents and strongly oppose the Qala Creek project rather than seek. And by the way, whom did Minister Giovanna Debono consult before coming to the conclusion that the Qala Creek project is useful for Gozo?

The minister's fault?

Some readers are writing to newspapers to rally round the beleaguered Tourism Minister on the lines of "leave the minister alone since it is not his fault that the sector is in the doldrums".

This may be true but, while, needless to say, over-development of our islands is one of the factors which are keeping tourists away, the minister confidently asserted that the recent approval of the rationalisation exercise would not harm the tourism sector in any way, when in fact, competing destinations, such as Croatia ("The Mediterranean as it once was") and Montenegro ("Enjoy wild beauty") vaunt their pristine environment.

Conflicting signals from EU on the environment

To describe the European Union as a bulwark of the environment would be a chalk too far - however, the EU is generally favourably disposed towards green initiatives, bar a few eyebrow-raising exceptions. Here are a few examples of both pro- and anti-green drives:

Mediterranean - In the words of Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, "we have to act for the promotion of economic development of the Mediterranean and the protection of the health of its people. Inaction is not an option. This strategy aims to revitalise and strengthen co-operation between the EU, our Mediterranean neighbours and the relevant international

organisations to safeguard the region's environment and natural resources for the long term. If we fail, the Mediterranean could deteriorate beyond repair."

Cutting red tape on packaging waste - The Competitiveness Council has reached a political agreement to simplify legislation in the area of packaged goods. The agreement, if confirmed by the European Parliament, will mean free sizes for pre-packed products except for wines and spirits, for which the current existing fixed sizes have been streamlined. This would mean the replacement of 25 different national rules and two EU directives on nominal quantities by one single EU directive. This was another step to deliver on the Commission's work programme to simplify EU legislation under the Better Regulation initiative.

Shocking decision on renewable energy subsidies - The European Commission recently warned an EU member state, Luxembourg (and possibly also other EU countries), to reverse its current policy of compensating electricity customers for the price difference between alternative ('sustainable') energy and power produced using traditional fossil fuels. The Commission has accused Luxembourg of engaging in 'market distortion', thereby contravening EU policy, and has warned the Grand Duchy to halt the practice immediately. The European Environmental Bureau, Europe's largest coalition of environmental NGOs, has informed the Commission that its warning goes against a fundamental EU aim of encouraging sustainable development and also undermines the EU's Kyoto objectives.

Finnish port case - On September 12, the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee considered a petition from Finnish citizens' organisations asking Parliament to prevent a serious violation of EU biodiversity protection laws by Finnish authorities. The petition protested against a major harbour already being built at Vuosaari, a key nature conservation area which Finland recognises as a Natura 2000 site.

Dumping at sea conventions

In view of the recent brouhaha regarding the dumping of construction waste off Marsaxlokk, with the loading of barges occurring at the Freeport, I thought it would be judicious to spell out what the status quo regarding dumping at sea currently is.

One source of information on the matter is the Waste Management Subject Plan (Final Report: Space for waste) prepared by the Environmental Management Unit of MEPA in 2002. The report states that:

"Dumping at sea should not be considered in areas that are:

- fisheries grounds of economic significance;
 - breeding, nursery or feeding grounds for species of economic/ecological significance;
 - Marine Conservation Areas;
 - bathing areas or upstream of bathing areas;
 - areas containing meadows of the sea-grass *Posidonia oceanica*;
 - on or close to reefs;
 - in large shallow inlets and bays;
 - important marine archaeological sites;
 - other areas that have habitats that require the designation of Special Areas of Conservation as listed in Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC.
- No dumping shall occur in sensitive coastal areas or in areas where material is likely to be carried towards sensitive sites along the shore.
- Dumping grounds shall require the preparation of an environmental monitoring programme, the designation of a buffer zone around the dumpsite, and the establishment of control sites in the vicinity."

One wonders as to the nature of environmental monitoring that the dumping of waste off Marsaxlokk Bay was being subjected to?

Quoting further from the report, "Dumping at sea shall be avoided as much as practicably possible. Dumping at sea shall only be acceptable when land-based alternatives have been exhausted and when it can be demonstrated that dumping-at-sea is the Best Practicable Environmental Option (BPEO) for the particular waste stream that needs disposal."

Have we really given up on trying to reduce the total volume of C&D waste generated every year? Have we really given up trying to use such waste for alternative uses? Are all our exhausted quarries filled to the brim with building debris, so that we can now opt for dumping at sea? Or is it because dumping at sea is the 'softest' option?

This report also states that "Since the dumping of waste at sea constitutes a significant wastage of resources, whenever possible dumping at sea should be carried out in a way that makes use of the dumped material (e.g. creation of artificial reefs)" and "the assessment of any proposals for dumping waste at sea should include an extensive assessment of the impacts

that would arise from vehicles transferring waste to the transportation vessels and also from the construction of transfer facilities on quays."

While the former is very cogent, asking whether a traffic impact assessment of the barges-loading exercise at the Freeport has been conducted is purely a cavalier exercise. With rubble-laden trucks constantly choking our roads, I wonder if any such assessments have been conducted at all.

The next GWB column will examine other related reports. I thank Annalise Falzon of Nature Trust (Malta) for drawing my attention to them.

Illegalities

MEPA has refused to sanction a number of illegalities at the Sunny Coast Lido in Qawra, despite protests by the owner, who understandably pointed out that other kiosks and illegally constructed rooms close by were sanctioned by MEPA only last year.

The case offers much food for thought - for example...

Offroading at Kennedy Grove

After being alerted by a conscientious individual, I myself drew MEPA's attention to the organisation of an illegal offroading event at Kennedy Grove. All offroading events require a MEPA permit, under LN 197 of 1997.

Needless to say, such an event was not authorised and was given the thumbs down two days before it was due to be held. What heartens me is that the person blowing the whistle on the illegal event is an offroading fan himself, but of 'legal' offroading, as he puts it. Well done! Self-regulation is the key to long-term sustainability.

Carob trees and car-free day

Writing in The Times on September 30, Lino Busuttill of L-Iklin, recounts how he and other residents in L-Iklin (opposite the fireworks factories and north of K. Vassallo Street) observed two individuals running from an old carob tree they had set on fire.

These residents promptly informed Civil Protection, who managed to save the tree. Frequently carob trees are a nuisance to those wishing to develop an area in view of their high ecological value - hence, such trees are frequently targeted by vandals, as is currently happening in the large Msida swathe of land recently inserted within the scheme. Well done to Mr Busuttill and co!

Alexandra Mifsud (The Times, September 30) laments about the authorities giving up on organising a car-free day and giving in to protests by GRTU and the business sector in general when she states: "Yet, can the country really afford to fall behind on an environmental issue that will shape the future of the world? Isn't it time to set up a think tank and allocate funds for the realisation of a truly effective Mobility Week in 2007?"

Silver linings

Horticulture course - MOAM is actively collaborating with MCAST's Agribusiness Institute to set up the very first diploma course in applied horticulture. The novel evening course will cater for farmers, consumers and gardeners. An accolade should go to the main catalyst behind such a course - Kirkop mayor Mario Salerno.

Magtab open day - The Ministry of Rural Affairs and Environment organised an open day at Magtab yesterday week. Visitors were able to follow the progress on the rehabilitation of the old Magtab dump, the development of a new civic amenity site for separated bulky waste and the work on the Ghallis engineered landfill and on the hazardous waste landfill.

Joseph Muscat - Labour MEP Joseph Muscat has called on the European Commission to ensure Malta adheres to its obligations and starts monitoring the emissions of carbon dioxide and other hazardous gasses from the power station plants in Marsa and Delimara.

WasteServ receives funds - from e-twinning re waste and the provision of training.

Young Scientists Project - the students representing Malta in the Young Scientists event held in Stockholm submitted a laudable project (i.e. a model as how to rehabilitate disused quarries and convert them to agricultural land) since it draws the limelight on the disproportionate amount of C&D waste generated on the islands.