

Budget afterthoughts



HSBC Executive Director Charles J. Farrugia renewing, together with his grandson, his corporate environmental responsibility by helping to plant some of the 2,000 trees planted at Salina on October 30

While we are still gripped by Budget frenzy, I might as well lend my voice too on this hot potato. Strictly from an environmental point of view, the 2006 Budget (dubbed by many as the 'energy Budget') was not such a depressing affair after all.

Scouring through the panoply of measures introduced, one notes with satisfaction the:

- increased accent on environmental education, with acknowledgement of the sterling work carried out by Nature Trust, for example, within the ambit of eko-skola;
- emphasis on alternative energy sources, with increases in the incentives paid to those buying solar power heaters and roof insulation, and those injecting surplus energy they produce into the national grid;
- emphasis on an awareness campaign to reduce waste generation and bolster waste-sorting at source, through an amplified number of installed bring-in sites and recycling stations;
- emphasis on afforestation projects, such as those at Salina, Mellieha and Xrobb I-Ghagin;
- emphasis on organic farming methods through appropriate incentives paid out to farmers; and
- emphasis on the upholding of environmental laws through the launch of green wardens.

Issues which dampened slightly the party include:

- no mention of any reformed rent law;
- the proposed beefing up of the human resources of the ALE and MEPA did not materialise; and
- the national waste strategy has still not seen the light of day.

Property taxes

A veritable brouhaha has been generated on the revision of the property taxation terms in the Budget. One side of the fence states that the measure will actually stave off speculation in this country since it will lead to an increased property mobility as a result of the lower taxation being exacted on the seller of property, hence helping to deflate those prices that are resulting in so many vacant properties.

The other side of the fence (estate agents, mainly) begs to differ, however, stating that the measure will only benefit those who have owned a property for a relatively long period of time and who cash in large profits from the sale of their properties.

Hence, ensuing with the same vein, speculation will actually be fuelled since the measure incentivises owners to hold on to their vacant properties so that they will gain in value.

Time will be the best counsel in this quandary... we certainly cannot afford a spike in property speculation in this country.

Golf... light at the end of the tunnel?

Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi stated in his Budget speech that the Government will not "make decisions irrespective of the price to be paid", in what can be deemed to be the first shreds of doubt being cast over the Xaghra I-Hamra site.

Finally, some symptoms of maturity seem to be creeping in the decision-makers, after a plethora of valid reasons were put forward over the last few weeks as to why the XLH site should be scuttled. It's now a Hobson's choice for the MTA.

However, Pembroke, ecologically-speaking, is on a par (if not even higher) than XLH, a fact which, in the past, has led to the refusal of a golf course proposal for the site already. White

Rocks could well prove the lesser of all the evils, as the golf course development (strictly not straddling over the Pembroke area) could stem the expansion of the shanty town on site and of the ever-growing Splash N Fun park.

Maybe the authorities are playing it safe, knowing full well that on October 18, the EU Commission decided to send the Italian government a supplementary final written warning over the way Italy has implemented the EU directive on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) with respect to projects known as "strategic works to be built in the national interest".

Offroading... call for clarification

The last weekend saw a renewed flurry of offroading activities being organised around the islands, some of which were publicised repeatedly on local radio stations. A recurrent anomalous statement one hears within such publicity is that "further venues will be disclosed on site", uttered after the announcement of the meeting place.

Such a statement raises more than one eyebrow for its reticence. Could anyone from the offroading clubs explain the reason/s behind such a statement? Is the reticence intended simply to make the event more piquant for participants or are there less licit justifications behind it?

Updates on previous stories

This section was compiled with the collaboration of Ms Annalise Falzon, NTM and MEPA, including the enforcement and PR sections.

Comino (Bejta tal-Fenek) - in correspondence trickling Nature Trust's way from MEPA (November 9, 2005), it is stated that: "The works in question are being undertaken without development permission. Enforcement action is being taken against the Commissioner of Lands to rectify the situation.

"Site will continue to be monitored." The site in question on Comino was featured in this column on October 16. It is common praxis to hound the Commissioner of Lands when public land is involved - I am more than intrigued to know exactly what this enforcement action will entail.

MEPA should ensure that the same site is restored, or is this simply wishful thinking on my behalf?

Wied Moqbol quarry relocation - bearing testimony to the resilience of our developers, PA 2700/00, referring to the relocation of a hardstone quarry from Hagar Qim to Wied Moqbol, is once more up for reconsideration.

In fact, as you are reading this article, the die has already been cast on this site (last Thursday in fact). Ironclad arguments in favour of a refusal include the fact that the site lies within a Rural Conservation Area, within an ODZ, is adjacent to a scheduled area and two-thirds of the same site lies under the jurisdiction of the Joint Office (ex-Church land), which precludes uses such as quarrying for the site.

Hal Far workshop application - somewhat longer in the tooth is PA 00633/05, referring to the Hal Salvun site at Hal Far. This site has been earmarked for a possible development of a boat yard: workshop/open storage site/garage, cheek and bill from a residence at Tal-Gebel Road (to be exact, immediately adjacent to a residence).

Luckily, the same application was rebutted once by MEPA (on September 2, 2005), but the DCC is to have its say soon on the matter - one augurs that the pressure brought to bear by concerned residents from the site and the local council will compel MEPA to make the right decision once more.

Such an activity can be relocated to the Hal Far industrial estate, which is within the immediate propinquity.

MEPA... quo vadis?

In a recent seminar titled 'MEPA and how it works', some information was gleaned on the possible formulation of a novel system of environmental permits, which could possibly run parallel to the development permit system.

One can only augur that such permits are decided on not by another hand-picked board of just architects.

A possible reshuffling of the melange that is MEPA also appears to be on the cards, with the enforcement sections appearing to be the prime, albeit not the sole, movers.

More on proposed Xemxija marina

I will continue to sing from the same hymn sheet in asking MEPA to come clean on its involvement in the drafting of proposals for a marina at Xemxija.

The grapevine has it that a meeting is to be held at the end of November, with the participants being the MMA, the architects and financial consultants, the planning co-ordinators for the project, the MTA and even MEPA, with four of its head honchos to be present.

If confirmed, this would be in serious breach of the planning process, with MEPA getting involved at such a stage. Can MEPA confirm or rebut the above?

The Kempinski San Lawrenz Hotel... another Verdala Mansions?

Yet another query submitted to MEPA obo NTM was whether the permit for the extension of the Kempinski San Lawrenz Hotel actually covered a hotel extension or even an extension in the number of residential apartments.

This query is in direct response to adverts appearing on the Web (see http://residences.kempinski-gozo.com/residences_overview.htm) and on the media announcing the sale of residential apartments within the resort.

One hopes that the resort is not another analogy to Verdala Mansions in Rabat, for which a permit to extend the existing hotel was procured, only for a larger number of apartments to be constructed in an ODZ site.

Silver linings

Media coverage of environmental issues - as a sign of the times, the front page of The Malta Independent on Sunday (November 6) was emblazoned with a green issue and, lo and behold, it was not a waste- or littering-related issue but a development-related one, spanning over the environs of Ramla in Gozo.

That civil conscience has finally cotton-balled is evident from the continuous stream of 'green' letters filling up the correspondence pages of our newspapers, with irate citizens making their voice heard on Pender Place, St Julian's, Qui-si-Sana, the Wardija antenna installation, etc. Some might dub it as 'nimbyism' - it's always a start.

Upsurge in littering warnings and number of bus commuters - in the first 10 days since the new regulations against illegal dumping and littering were introduced, plain clothes wardens have issued 412 written warnings in various towns and villages, an average of about 40 a day.

In addition, the number of commuters using the buses increased by one per cent in the year up to last September 30 - our public transport service is still frowned upon by many but at least...

Introduction of green wardens - after Nature Trust (Malta) and other conscientious entities around the islands have been clamouring since the early 1980s, six plain clothes green wardens have started patrolling specific countryside routes, keeping their eyes peeled for littering offences.

One should not rest on one's laurels, however, and the number should be bolstered in future and their duties not restricted to littering and dumping, but also over illegal collection of protected species, like frogs and freshwater crab, land reclamation, tree cutting and other infringements. The 24-hour operative service number is 2132-4797 to which the green wardens are collated - such a number can be used to report infringements in rural areas.

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