

## Away from the political limelight



An application proposes the construction of a three-star aparthotel in a pristine ODZ site below the Mellieha parish church.

While all political contestants are engrossed in the time-honoured antics and posturing in view of the March 8 election, some preposterous Outside Development Zone applications have been filed.

These include the proposed construction of a three-star aparthotel (PA00071/08) along the undeveloped section Triq il-Marfa, Mellieha, right in the middle of an ODZ area.

As if the garish desecration of the heights on one side of Triq il-Marfa by obtrusive monoliths were not enough, the developers (synonymous with numerous scourges at Bahrija) have now set their sights on the opposite, virgin side of the road.

It would be interesting if some of our budding and aspiring ministers actually took time off the campaign trail to denounce such preposterous applications. Is anyone actually proposing an outright ban on all ODZ applications, excluding those for legitimate purposes?

Why was Environment Minister George Pullicino's proposal not taken on board at a political level? Is it because of the leverage of developers, who are frenetically trying to douse such types of proposals without having the courage to say so in public? The Prime Minister's pledge to demolish at once all illegal developments is laudable but pales in front of the deluge of ODZ applications.

### **No hope for effective Mepa reform**

The reform of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority seems to be dear to both political parties - hence, you might be forgiven for being buoyed by the pronounced resolve to actually carry out the job.

However, the efficacy of such reform will eventually depend on the mastermind behind it and his real intentions and objectives. Flitting through the proposals fielded by Robert Musumeci, chairman of the Building Industry Consultative Council, one gets the impression that any Mepa reform in the pipeline is actually concerned with making the authority more efficient and developer-congenial, rather than instilling some form of environmental consciousness.

In fact, Robert Musumeci's 10-point proposals (The Sunday Times, February 17) are all about slashing timeframes for applicants. For example, once an application has been approved, the developer can initiate works immediately. This contrasts with the Government's proposals to give some leeway to third party objectors to file an appeal, which would be prejudiced if Mr

Musumeci got his way. For example, under his proposals external consultees have just one month to communicate their opinion to Mepa.

It is essential that whoever is lumbered with the onerous task of reforming Mepa removes his professional and commercial hat to avoid having reform aimed at addressing only the interests of a specific cohort - applicants/developers in this case. A task team composed of various professional hues should be entrusted with the job.

## **Eco-Gozo?**

The Nationalist Party's pledge to respect the ecological integrity of Gozo is a laudable initiative. One might contend that this initiative comes somewhat late in the day, after the many scars one can observe in Gozo. However, I welcome such a move in a somewhat lukewarm way for another reason.

This column has previously reported the planning application referring to the construction of an apartment block with garages in an ODZ area along Triq il-Ħabel Twil, Marsalforn (PA 01735/06). With the gamut of garish apartment blocks peppering the environs of Marsalforn, which has been transformed into a mirror image of St Paul's Bay, one would have expected a refusal of the same proposal. But in a spirit at odds with the proposed Eco-Gozo, Mepa approved the proposal, after requesting some minor changes, such as a recessed penthouse and other cosmetic conditions.

## **The real issues**

While our political spin doctors are busy preening themselves and pouring flyers into our letter boxes, some issues, which deserve much more attention, literally fall by the wayside.

The despicable act of the torching of vehicles belonging to Birdlife volunteers in Buskett warranted a soul-searching exercise by all those who have pandered in the past to notorious lobby groups in this country.

One might argue that the obscenity is not traceable to any group since no individual was caught in the act. However, the identity of the lobby group to whom the perpetrators probably belong is known to all - and they are well-known for their unsavoury tactics.

## **Zero tolerance?**

One of the Labour Party's rallying cries has been 'zero tolerance', construed to be a justifiably Draconian approach to all forms of corruption and to conflicts of interest. While this call is laudable, whatever the pulpit, it should be extended to all other sectors of perceived bad governance.

It was heartening to hear Labour leader Alfred Sant mutter the word phrase 'ODZ' in a television debate - however, it would be much more consistent for the MLP to preclude its exponents from representing applicants on ODZ proposals - a case in point is for the proposed development of underlying basement garages and overlying buildings at the hamlet of Ta' Mrejnu in Mġarr (PA 07512/07) - despite the application being cleverly branded as an 'end-of-scheme' one, the site in question is listed as ODZ on the Mepa website. The architect for this application happens to be Labour MP Charles Buhagiar.

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