

Unruly Works Division



The decision to have a waste separation plant in the midst of Wied Garnaw, l/o Sta Lucija, was recently postponed, pending a site inspection. When will this valley finally breathe a sigh of relief at the end of the ODZ application onslaught?

This column has often revealed the uncouth ways adopted by the Works Division, which frequently show utter disregard for the planning process by proceeding with works before permits are actually in hand - cases in point are the works at Wied Ghollieqa and Salina.

Recently, Works were involved in the excavation of a stormwater culvert in a valley bed at Gharghur without permit and an enforcement notice was meted out in this case. It was only after works had actually started that baseline studies concerning the removal of trees on site, etc., were presented.

The same thing happened at the Nature 2000 site of Wied Babu in Zurrieq - after MEPA halted procedures for the construction of the obsolete belvedere because of a breach of the permit conditions, works on site still proceeded on March 8, as local residents can testify.

In view of this long string of misdemeanours, things do not seem so rosy for the planned excavation of a stone channel through Burmarrad to solve flooding problems. A channel, built by the British, already exists. However, this has been silted up, and farmers have taken it over for cultivation.

MEPA should draw a line and impose the drafting of an EIA for this project, and seek guarantees on what will eventually be done with all the debris and rubble that will be generated.

Sobering too are plans for the large wooded area beneath St Helen's Bastion in Cospicua known as Il-Mixtla ta' Bormla, for which an application (PA 07041/05) exists to "create a recreational area with new landscaping, paving works and street furniture". Is this yet another example of 'pink concrete' development reminiscent of the 'bulldozer' style of the 1970s and 1980s?

A clear expression of the public environmental misinformation (exploited by our administrators) is a letter by Ms Tanya Caruana (The Times, December 7, 2005) in which, on behalf of the Bingemma residents, she thanks the Minister for Resources and Infrastructure, Ninu Zammit, together with his dedicated team at the Cleansing Services Department, for the much needed cleansing works executed recently at Wied Bingemma, limits of Mgarr. It is now a desolate 'cleansed' alien valley, devoid of any undergrowth and featuring heavily-pruned trees.

The operations of the Works Division should be restricted to managed areas, such as public gardens, and not to natural areas, such as Buskett, Wied Babu, etc., where their 'expertise' is certainly not appreciated.

Gozo... vacant buildings chimera

Klara and Peter Paschke (The Times, March 14) decry the building onslaught currently going on in Gozo, despite the profuse number of vacant buildings - "four out of six apartments are hardly ever used. When we walk through the various villages we realise that obviously a major

portion of the housing is not utilised - it is in shell form or falling to pieces... and empty plots are being used as rubbish dumps."

Contrast all this with adverts such as the one featured last Sunday whereby three terraced villas were being offered for sale in the former Birbuba hamlet of Gharb in Gozo. Despite ominously being called 'The Carob', these properties, with their large swimming pools and the lot, fuel the construction rat race currently being observed in the Gharb environs.

In an article, "Property will boom with low cost airlines", carried in The Times of February 22, Joseph Lupi, managing director of Frank Salt Real Estate, states that, with the advent of low-cost airlines, sales of property for holiday purposes in Malta will explode, as had happened in competing countries.

Shudders run my spine - yet another property boom for Malta? With three times the amount of developed land as in the rest of the EU? When will our land-hungry developers ever be satiated?

La Grotta saga

It seems that some enforcement notices are conveniently swept under the carpet - a case in point is ECF00893/99, first issued in 1999, and referring to La Grotta Discotheque in Xlendi, which is still operating despite the stop and enforcement notices it has notched up.

What's intriguing is that MEPA's Website still features April 6, 2005 (almost one year ago) as the last deferral date for hearing of the case. Has MEPA actually given up hope on addressing this issue - some updating of its Website is surely needed.

ALE - in dire need of help

To state that the Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) section of the police is downtrodden is a misnomer - understaffed, they are also assigned other duties within the police force besides their run-of-the-mill illegal hunting and trapping curbing duties.

This strain is reflected in statistics for hunters and trappers apprehended published for the last years. In 2004, a total of 563 hunters were prosecuted for infringing hunting regulations, 256 more than 2005. Surely, this decrease cannot be attributed to better-behaved hunters and trappers but to a waste of the ALE's resources - an urgent need to limit the ALE's resources only to its former duties is thus needed.

News that Malta's clay pigeon champion was fined Lm50 after he pleaded guilty to possessing an electronic bird caller, the possession and use of which is illegal, is a sad event indeed - it shows that even our flag-bearers are guilty of flouting environmental laws.

Signs of things to come?

The Ta' Cenc case holds very few analogies with the Verdala golf course issue - one of these is that one or two NGOs inexplicably stick their neck out to defend the project. In this case, it was Wirt Ghawdex, which raised many eyebrows when stating that, despite being at odds with certain aspects of the proposals for Ta' Cenc, it gave its thumbs up for the construction of the 59 bungalows to the right of the hotel.

If names and monickers are something to go by, then Wirt Ghawdex is certainly inappropriate, to say the least - wirt can be translated as 'legacy' - what legacy are we leaving behind for future generations? Concrete landscapes? The Ramblers' Association certainly hit on the right play when they asked Wirt Ghawdex to publicly declare its aims and objections for the sake of transparency.

Many people claimed that their jaw dropped when they read of the alleged manhandling of a British resident, Mark Thorogood, by the owners of the Ta' Cenc Hotel when he turned up at the promontory for a walk organised by the association. I have got used to developers unscrupulously fencing off large tracts of coast - if these claims by the Ramblers' Association and AD (Gozo) are true, then Victor Borg's claim that public access to Ta' Cenc will not be thwarted in any way has just been disproved.

As rightly highlighted by Louis Pace (The Times, March 8), "only 53.8 per cent of residences in Gozo are occupied all the year. A further 5,500 plots are available within the Development Zone. This is more than three times that required."

Joke of the day

George Fenech, of the Tumas Group, was quoted on March 5 as saying that the money invested by his group in the garden adjacent to Spinola Palace, which will be enjoyed by the public, was an expression of group's corporate social responsibility.

One would agree that the closing of the same garden to binge-drinkers, its general sprucing up and its use by NGOs in the evening are all positive developments, but surely the Tumas Group did not show corporate responsibility when it applied to extend the Portomaso operations further, encroaching on yet another coastal area, close to a scheduled wetland area, or the

group's current operations at Ta' Sellum in Mellieha, which was originally excavated beyond the alignment marks in an area of high landscape value and where a number of indigenous trees and shrubs were uprooted.

The group should be lauded for striving to project its corporate responsibility but this should not only come in the form of some public garden upgrading but also in the shape of more respect for the natural environment.

Silver linings

Joe Borg on illegal fishing - Speaking in Paris during the launch of a report prepared by the High Seas Task Force (HSTF) on illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, European Fisheries Commissioner Joe Borg has promised that the EU will step up its efforts to reduce illegal fishing which erodes the sustainability of fish stocks.

Planned Marsascala park - An abandoned stretch of land in Marsascala that has been piling up with rubbish, animal carcasses and the odd abandoned car will be transformed into Malta's largest recreational park, measuring 50,000 square metres. This is welcome news, as long as the earmarked area straddles only over the degraded land between Ir-Razzett tal-Óbiberija and Sant'Antnin waste recycling plant and does not encroach upon the adjacent ecologically sensitive Wied Barun and Wied iz-Ziju areas.

Batteries recycled by WasteServ and help from Germany - WasteServ plans to export approximately 50 tonnes of batteries, collected from households, shops, schools and other outlets, to France for treatment - approximately three containerloads.

In addition, WasteServ Malta Ltd has started to receive technical assistance from Germany aimed at further improving expertise in waste management. This EU-funded project, which amounts to €400,000, will help the island apply the EU's Producer Responsibility Directives.

My bride-to-be, Prascovia Axiaq, and I would like to express our gratitude to the Jesuit community, who will be officiating at our wedding today. On behalf of all the staff at St Aloysius College, we would also like to express our full support to the Jesuit Fathers following the arson attack on their vehicles last week.