

Yacht marinas galore



A white elephant in the making. Despite numerous hotels in Gozo exchanging hands, some are extending their operations, like the San Lawrenz Hotel, originally conceived to be a wellness centre, incorporating even walks and the lot. The new casino building seen in the picture looks more like a housing estate in the making (picture by Victor Galea).

Mr Joseph Fenech, writing in *The Times* (August 8), has the temerity to propose three new yacht marinas - in the Gillieru area, at Veccja and even in the relatively pristine Mistra Bay, while, as a sop, granting the use of Pwales/Xemxija for bathing purposes.

Mr Fenech contradicts himself when stating that Xemxija Bay residents are witnessing a deterioration of seawater bathing quality due to the laissez faire attitude of the Maritime Authority, while in the same breath suggesting that three yacht marinas (with the one at Veccja just a stone's throw from the bathing area) should be developed. I have never seen people swim in yacht marinas, such as at Msida Creek, because of the profuse presence of hydrocarbons (such as oils) in the sea.

He also states that the environment at Xemxija Bay is being destroyed by building development, etc. - what about the destruction of the marine habitats he is contemplating when ludicrously stating that the Fekruna/Xemxija Hill/Ta' L-Ghazzelin and Sirens areas should be dredged? We have all savoured the sour experience of the massive dredging performed at Birzebbuga due to the Freeport project - try swimming at 'Pretty Bay' today!

In Mr Fenech's own words, "in order to generate a proper dialogue before decisions are taken", all facts must be stated, such as that the NE of the islands is extensively endowed with *Posidonia* seagrass meadows, a substantial chunk of which would be destroyed if his wild-eyed proposals go ahead. Proponents of such mega-projects would do well to acquaint themselves with some tenets of ecology first.

Civil society finally waking up

Politicians are realising that civil society has finally woken up from its torpor. Letters published in *The Times* give an inkling of the feelings of frustration out there.

Wardija Vodafone antenna - a protest was held by Wardija residents on July 30 following the erection of a Vodafone antenna and the smothering of swathes of pristine garigue in the process. The construction of the antenna breaches the precautionary principle, since it should not be sited close to residences in the absence of ironclad data on its effects, as aptly stated by MEPA's Ombudsman.

Triq it-Tonn and Ghar Ghasfur protests - residents at Triq it-Tonn, St Paul's Bay, are up in arms over the umpteenth application submitted to MEPA for the demolition of the Dejma Tower known as Ta' Bibu (Tabibu) Tower, reputedly the oldest building in St Paul's Bay, and the eventual development of multi-floor constructions on site (PA 4286/99).

This despite the fact that the area harbours numerous ecological, archaeological (such as cart ruts) and geological features (such as daghbien) and that the developer's thrusts have been rebutted by MEPA time and again between 1989 and 2000.

Why does MEPA allow its resources to be tied up by developers who want to strike it lucky in protracted appeals procedures? Yet another appeal is to be heard on September 16, where the developer is expected to present a document proving that the site has no assets worth preserving. Even though the tower is not to be demolished, MEPA should prevent it from becoming landlocked to ensure the visitor continues to enjoy its views.

Busietta Gardens development concern - John Caruana (July 27) and Joseph Xuereb (August 2) should be lauded for highlighting the current plight of Wied id-Dis, l/o Gharghur, which is being ravaged by the growing eyesore of Busietta Gardens. The public should follow these two readers' example to jolt politicians out of their torpor.

Cheeky applications

Applications worth mentioning in view of the unalloyed greed of their proponents are:

01902/05 - construction of two dwelling units, one with swimming pool, at Birbuba, Gharb (published on July 2), in what is an outside scheme area in the former hamlets of San Pietru and Birbuba.

02200/05 - the sanctioning of demolition of existing dilapidated room and construction of new one on same footprint, plus basement at the Ghadira caravan site (July 9) - how can one conceive building a basement on a caravan site?

03898/05 - construction of 13 garages, three maisonettes, eight flats and penthouse at Sqaq il-Harrub, Marsascula (July 9). Although it lies within the scheme, the site has numerous carob trees (as indicated by the placename) and should be preserved from further speculation. In the cluttered reality that is Marsascula, the site should be preserved as a reminder of how the village looked ages ago.

03127/05 - construction of semi-detached villa at Triq il-Milord, Bidnija (July 23) in what has become rampant speculation in Bidnija.

02889/05 - sanctioning of temporary platform to allow public access, reinstatement of shoreline and change of use of beach rooms at Ramla tal-Bir, Marfa (July 23) - for the layman, this refers to Hala Beach, where the developer unilaterally decided to plant palms on the beach, against MEPA's own guidelines, and has dumped soil on scheduled areas. Does the developer need to apply for a permit to allow public access to the shoreline?

03413/05 - outline application to develop two dwellings at Ghar Gerduf, Fontana (July 23), although the area is close to valleys of ecological importance.

04086/05 - Construction of an open storage yard for heavy plant/vehicles and to sanction existing building for Rock Cut Ltd in Triq il-Belt Valletta, Ghaxaq (July 23), although the area is already the subject of an existing enforcement notice and outside the scheme.

This section was compiled with the help of Annalise Falzon, Nature Trust (Malte).

More golfing blues

The sieve that separates the wheat from the chaff in the golfing issue appears to be information. While golf course supporters simply regurgitate the much-clichéd claim of 30,000 additional visitors to the islands and stating perfunctorily that "the golf course (in Gozo) is a must" (Franco J Scicluna, The Times, August 8), opponents have always given in-depth, competent facts to back their stance. Some more facts:

In a survey carried out by MTA among 1,000 consumers in Italy, Germany, France and the UK (carried on The Times Business section of July 21), 71% of Britons and 76% of Italians have no intention of coming to Malta in the next three years, but only 55% of Germans actually do. At the same time, the Germans associate Malta with history and culture. Shouldn't we be promoting more our forte (culture/history) then?

The water issue is not being thrown into the ring since the pro-golf lobby is confident on using the second-class water available from the sewage treatment plant to be developed soon at Ic-Cumnija near Anchor Bay. Such an argument is flawed for two main reasons: second-class water has a higher salinity than most freshwater - so it must surely be 'polished' (mixed) with other water to prevent soil salinity.

This means that the golf course will consume additional water besides that produced by the sewage treatment plant. Secondly, why waste such water on a golf course? This can be easily used for secondary purposes to stave off the current illegal over-exploitation of 15 million cubic metres of groundwater (MRA, 2004)

The Guardian of July 22 carried an interview with a Dutch water engineer working on golf courses in Spain who stated that an 18-hole golf course needs to be watered 300 days a year and consumes as much water as 10,000 households. This is in the wake of the ongoing

drought in the Iberian peninsula, with 80% of Portugal being affected and with its corn harvest being slashed by 70%. More than 40 new golf courses are planned for the Murcia region alone and as many again for Alicante and Almeria!

Even the choice of name is beguiling - first it was Xaghra l-Hamra, whose name (red garigue) may evoke the idea of wasteland to the average voter - now, it's Rdum il-Wahx, which conjures up images of an inhospitable wilderness to the Maltese potato couch - I challenge any of these to visit the site and get their own impressions of the site.

The Prime Minister is right when he states that "all hell has broken loose" since he unilaterally announced the choice of Xaghra l-Hamra for a golf course. The public will not accept the usurpation of hundreds of hectares of public land, supposedly in the public interest.

Dr Gonzi states that the area in question is used primarily for dumping and for offroading purposes - the accompanying pictures of the site should counter such a claim, since offroading and dumping is plaguing just a small part of the earmarked plot. If the site was indeed being used by miscreants as Dr Gonzi claims, then doesn't this show the government's inability to rectify matters? This column itself has blown the whistle many a time on offroading activities on site, all to no avail.

"Roamer" (July 31) commented on a letter written by Ms Annalise Falzon, who replied to the columnist's denigration of the rambling pastime. Through an oversight, Ms Falzon's letter was not published in the Letters pages of that issue of The Sunday Times. Here are excerpts from her letter:

"Roamer should limit himself to sitting around in his garden and practising silence rather than writing factless articles. My jaw dropped when I read Roamer's Column (July 24) where he deemed fit to write about an event in which he did not even bother to participate. Roamer stated that he was impressed by how few people turned up for the symbolic walk at l-Xaghra l-Hamra - and he reached this conclusion by just seeing one photograph which he implies was taken from a particular angle so as to create the illusion of there being more people."

On the fast track

Although there is no PDS (Project Description Statement), no TOR (Terms of Reference) for the EIA and no tendering for the EIA for the Xaghra l-Hamra golf course, the government is already putting the cart before the horse in stating that ecologically sensitive sites can be waived since the earmarked area was actually double that needed by the golf course - are we to take it that studies for the site have already been commissioned?

It was all smiles and cheers when the EU Commissioner for Agriculture recently visited Malta, with exponents from the government's side actively lobbying for a fair deal for Maltese farmers - how does this tally with the authorities effectively evicting farmers from an area the size of 22 football grounds (as reported in MaltaToday) by ending their land leases, supposedly in the public interest? Running roughshod over farmers is yet another hallmark of the fast track approach (to make it on time for the next elections) being adopted by Government.

The rumour mill has it that an eminent building contractor, an avid supporter of one of the two major political parties, has already been short-listed for the golf course at Xaghra l-Hamra and for the real estate frenzy at Manikata and environs that is to follow. Only time will tell if these rumours are true.

Construction industry... quo vadis?

THE construction industry is certainly being buoyed by the Housing Authority which, in the words of its chairman, Marisa Micallef, finances itself mainly through the acquisition of Church land and its subsequent development and selling.

In the vicious circle that is the construction mill on the islands, demand for new property is always guaranteed, even if three-quarters of the vacant dwellings in the islands (roughly a quarter of the total) are in an acceptable state of repair (SPR document).

Scaremongering, doomsday statements, like "Do you want them to tax your vacant property?" by Ms Micallef herself, will do nothing to alleviate such a crisis - what's wrong with taxing property which is lying idle? Is there some social rationale behind it since, for example, it is the lower rungs of society that own a second or third vacant house?

Silver linings

The following initiatives must be commended:

HSBC latest initiative - a tree is to be planted for every new account opened by University students.

MEPA Direct Action Team - sealing entrance to a site used for dumping purposes in Mtarfa in the area known as Il-Marg to rectify the dumping of topsoil and other offences perpetrated by road contractors on the vicinity. Funnily enough, the same road contractors have now submitted an application for the same dumping after having carried it out in the first place!

Civil Protection Department - the CPD is to be lauded for responding promptly to a spate of fires around the islands last weekend, namely at Wied is-Dis (Gharghur), Marsalforn Valley and at Xaghra. One hopes that the Wied id-Dis incident is not related to any degradation of the site to open it to the floodgates of further development.

Wied Mejxu - The Sunday Times rightly highlighted the plight of Wied Mejxu in Swieqi, which is under the perpetual aegis of the construction industry, which has set up camp in the valley, literally.

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