

Wirt Ghawdex on Gozo's Regional Development Strategy

Gozitan heritage NGO *Wirt Ghawdex* has recently submitted a set of proposals to the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) as part of the consultation process regarding the Gozo Regional Development Plan being proposed by the Authority.

Wirt Ghawdex has made several recommendations aimed at protecting Gozo's cultural and natural heritage whilst ensuring that development on the island is sustainable and safeguards the protection and preservation of Gozo's unique characteristics, which are being eroded at a very fast pace. There is every reason to consider the grim urban sprawl in large sections of Malta - enabled as it is by planning strategies that are not fit for purpose - as a clarion call to urgent attention to the same policies' mindless application to Gozo.

In regard to the Gozo-Malta tunnel, the society remains opposed to this proposal and expressed its serious reservations about the benefits such a major project would bring to Gozo when considering the natural, economic and social impacts it will inevitably have on the island. It also expressed serious concerns on the proposed airstrip, arguing that the benefits of such a proposal are far outweighed by the detrimental impact on the surroundings. In this regard it noted with satisfaction the introduction of the fourth ferry and the fast ferry service, which resulted in a significant improvement in transportation between the islands.

Wirt Ghawdex said that the guiding principle of any strategy related to Gozo should always be an acknowledgement and acceptance of the size limitations of the island. While this presents challenges, ultimately it has to be recognised that the island's smallness is, in fact, one of the key aspects that lend Gozo its unique character, distinguishing it from the larger island and endowing it with its attractiveness and appeal to tourists. Continued expansion via sea/land reclamation and additional disturbance of existing bays will erode the very attributes that give Gozo its advantage. Incentives such as the reduction of property stamp duty should be treated with circumspection, for similar financial schemes have served to present Gozo as an exploitable asset, exacerbating its ruinous development.

Wirt Ghawdex made a number of proposals intended to safeguard Gozo's natural and historical assets for future generations whilst ensuring a better standard of living for current ones.

Planning policy with regard to Gozo and Comino should not remain exclusively within the remit of the Planning Authority (PA), but the GRDA should be able to exert leverage on the shaping of Gozo's planning and development policy. A change can only come about via appropriate revision of existing development policies attuned to Gozo's setting, where the GRDA can serve a useful role.

Special policies tailored specifically for Gozo need to be considered in order to preserve village cores, important buildings, entire streetscapes, and skylines. Town and village skylines are currently under siege on account of existing PA policies.

Being an island with clear views of a dark horizon when looking out to sea (e.g. Dwejra), Gozo is also well-placed to attract dark sky tourism, a niche but growing area of eco-tourism. However, this requires the preservation of Gozo's Dark Sky Heritage Areas and appropriate light pollution mitigation measures entrenched in a clear legal framework. Besides representing a waste of energy, light pollution has been shown to have many adverse effects on ecology, and is also linked to problems of human health. As an immediate measure that can be

implemented without delay, *Wirt Ghawdex* proposed that the lighting of public monuments, church domes, billboards, and facades should be turned off after a given hour of night (e.g. past midnight).

In regard to Comino, especially in the case of such sites as the Blue Lagoon, a booking system coupled with the establishment of a maximum quota of visitors should be considered in order to reduce the strain on the island and to offer a much better experience for visitors.

Wirt Ghawdex hopes that by keeping Gozo's identity, heritage, and culture squarely in mind, the island's future will not end up being a grey and soulless cacophony of concrete cuboids devoid of the very characteristics that once endowed it with its distinctiveness.

The full document with all the recommendations made by Wirt Ghawdex may be viewed on the facebook page and on the website www.wirtghawdex.org of the society.