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PRO-BUSINESS AT ALL COST OR PRO-COMMUNITY?

REACTION BY THE CHURCH ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

Like so many other citizens, the Church Environment Commission (KA) is baffled by the decision of the Planning Authority (PA) to approve the extensive project proposed by db Group at St George's Bay. The KA, like other concerned citizens, had already tabled its objections for the development in its communication dated 30th May 2018.¹ At this point in time, rather than repeating the objections, the KA feels that this decision warrants answers to some serious questions:

- How can the PA reconcile its decision with its mission of “acting on behalf of the community to provide a balanced and sustainable environment,”² when one considers the thousands of objections levelled against this development that were disregarded? These objections include those coming from communities (i.e. of Pembroke, St Julian's and Swieqi) that will be directly impacted by the project. What underlying reason could there be that would justify the brushing aside of these objections? In whose interest is the PA functioning? Such a decision surely rules out the interest of the surrounding communities.
- How can a **planning** authority refute time and again opportunities (including the repeated and consistent appeals of the Chairperson of the Planning Board at the PA) to force development proposals (particularly for this region) to be decided within a framework of a masterplan? How can a **planning** authority reconcile its preference for sporadic mega-projects that continue to wreak havoc in communities in lieu of masterplans or local plans? Such plans would, if drawn up with communities' wellbeing in mind, contribute to ensuring a sustainable management of our limited space and demonstrate the PA's commitment to implement its mission, i.e. to “endeavour to provide a better

¹<http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2018/PRESS%20RELEASES/57%20KA%20REACTION%20ST%20GEO%20RGE%20S%20BAY%20EN.pdf>

² <https://youtu.be/yOL6zvhdOL4>

quality of life for the community through transparent and fair planning services, today and tomorrow”.³

Such repeated inconsistencies in the PA’s decisions are surely not helping it to achieve its vision of “making Malta and Gozo a more pleasant and desirable place to live in”.⁴ Has the PA succumbed to the pro-business at all cost bug as well? If that is the case, and the PA is proving to be another toothless watchdog (as the former MEPA), which authority would have the guts to challenge the current business model and promote a pro-community strategy for development?

When, due to unbridled construction, the wellbeing of our citizens and communities become so clearly at risk, decisions should not be tainted by petty partisan politics. Objections to this (and similar) decision are coming from citizens/residents—irrespective of their political affiliation—who are concerned about the declining quality of urban life due to unplanned and unsustainable development. What Malta needs is not another political ping-pong match, but a concerted effort to promote a pro-community policy.

It is indeed ironic that while the Planning Authority disregarded completely the justified concerns of communities affected by the proposed db Group project, it is now organising a conference in the first week of October with the title *Planning for Liveable Places*.⁵ The conference will discuss “the need to create the right social, economic and environmental conditions for liveable places”.⁶ If communities have no say at all on what happens in their own liveable places, then the KA feels that our islands are heading towards a planning system which does not even give lip service to the needs of communities let alone to improve their liveable place.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <https://www.pa.org.mt/masp2018>

⁶ Ibid