

PM's dialogue meeting

Sliema residents claim streets are becoming 'canyons'

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There was barely any mention of the hottest potatoes of the moment - the Qui-Si-Sana and Chalet projects - at yesterday's meeting. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The unsustainable development of Sliema, often to the detriment of buildings of architectural worth, was one of the bones of contention raised during a dialogue meeting with Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi at St Patrick's, Sliema, yesterday.

The quality of life of Sliema residents had been "eroded through unsustainable development", it was pointed out, though there was barely any mention of the hottest potatoes of the moment - the Qui-Si-Sana and Chalet projects.

The Sliema Front has been lost, and now, even the side streets were risking becoming canyons, with requests for taller buildings on the increase and destined to throw not only the promenade, but also the beach into the shade.

Scheduled houses would benefit from financial assistance for maintenance and conservation, said a local council member, pointing out that many were inhabited by elderly people, who could not keep up with the expenses to do the maintenance.

Dr Gonzi invited suggestions on how to use the €805 million from the EU between 2007 and 2013, with a focus on the environment, but many present took the opportunity to voice other complaints, unrelated to the funding aspect.

Several environment NGOs were present at the meeting, requesting protection and conservation of Natura 2000 sites, new nature reserves, the embellishment of Maghtab, the creation of national parks, which would relieve pressure on the limited countryside, and, in particular, alternative energy sources, such as wind farms and solar energy.

Dr Gonzi pointed out that while the government was actively looking into these alternatives, it could not be denied that the country had its limitations.

"Alternative energy costs money too, and we would have to pay for it," he said, explaining that the windmills for a wind farm would only generate three per cent of the energy the country needed. The possibility of offshore wind farms was being studied and was feasible, but such a project required an area where the sea was not deeper than 50 metres, which proved to be a stumbling block.

As regards land reclamation, two areas have been identified for the creation of artificial islands, but the problem was that it could mean destroying particular algae in these sites.

Dr Gonzi expressed the dilemmas his government encountered in the face of such difficult decisions.

The treatment of waste, particularly of an industrial nature, was also a priority in view of the fact that several factories were investing in Malta and, while they were helping the economy, they were also producing waste that was hard to treat.

The Society for the Protection and Care of Animals appealed for financial assistance to be able to get cracking on

the "much-needed" national animal welfare centre, for which land has been allocated in Ta' Qali, while the Ramblers Association requested funds for a definite map of Malta, which was sorely needed, particularly for the benefit of tourists who preferred trekking.

As regards controlling contractors, who seemed to get away with all sorts of infringements, Environment Minister George Pullicino said new regulations governing them and their constructions should be issued and enforced by the middle of the year.

He said an improvement of the incentives for photovoltaic cells, introduced in the budget, was discussed with the Prime Minister last week.

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