

NGOs not impressed by development boundary 'reduction'

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Officials of the NGOs at the protest at Mgarr square yesterday (Picture: Matthew Mirabelli)

The marginal decrease in the latest draft of the development boundaries has failed to impress a group of NGOs who gathered yesterday to make yet another call on the government to drop the proposal.

On Thursday, the Environment Ministry announced that the consultation process in connection with the development boundaries rationalisation process had ended and that the Malta Environment and Planning Authority had reduced the net surface area to be allocated for development by 0.1 per cent.

The issue is now due to be discussed by parliament's standing committee on the environment before a vote is taken in the chamber.

A number of the NGOs that addressed yesterday's press conference attempted to stop the process last Thursday through court action but a decision is still pending.

Nine organisations gathered in Mgarr to make one more plea for the government to reconsider its position. "We are thankful for the reduction," Lino Bugeja of the Ramblers Association said, "but we are not impressed. This slim decrease is no cause for celebration."

Astrid Vella of Flimkien Ghal Ambjent Ahjar said: "We are not against development, nor are we against all the pockets of land included in this so-called rationalisation process... but we cannot approve the inclusion of large tracts of land in the countryside. In this respect we ask the government to reconsider."

Similarly, Professor Edward Mallia, who represented Friends of the Earth, said that the government still failed to justify the need to allow further urban sprawl, pointing out that with the latest increase Malta's built-up area stands at more than three times the EU average.

"The government could have easily compensated people who have suffered social injustices," Mrs Vella insisted. "There are other people who suffered injustices... people short-changed by the outdated rent laws, or people who were cheated by the BICAL scandal," Mrs Vella insisted.

"If the government is so thirsty for social justice, then why not tackle these grave injustices first."

The choice of the place for the press conference, Mgarr, turned out to be problematic since it is one of the places where land chosen by MEPA, according to its interpretation of the Cabinet's criteria, was reduced.

A few locals, who later told The Times they were the owners of the tracts of land removed in the latest draft, booed the speakers as they were talking - hurling insults in an attempt to disrupt the event.

Their grief seems to stem from rumoured plans for a car park in the same land they are now prohibited from developing. "Everyone wants to protect the environment... I, for one, don't agree with including more land for development," said Robert Muscat whose plot has just been removed from the scheme, "but I will not tolerate that the same plot is expropriated to be developed as a car park either."

Ms Vella pointed out that there must have been a misunderstanding about the role of the NGOs at Mgarr. "We are against the land being used for any purpose and we would certainly be against the development of a car park

in that same spot, should it be proposed."

The NGOs which took part were BICREF, Flimkien Ghal Ambjent Ahjar, Friends of the Earth, Graffiti, the Ramblers' Association, the Archaeology Association, MOAM, Nature Trust, the Ghaqda Harsien Rurali Ghajn Tuffieha and the Qui si-Sana Residents' Association.

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