

AX Holdings presents 'facts to date' on Verdala golf course

by Joanna Ripard

IN A BID to dispel misinformation and allegations on its controversial golf course project at Verdala in the Press, AX Holdings last week circulated a 15-page document to the highest civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

AX Holdings have been waiting for a 3,000-page Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project to be approved by the Planning Authority for two years. Once approved, the company plans to post the EIA on the company Website for viewing and comments and will hold an exhibition of the plans.

Chairman Angelo Xuerab told *The Sunday Times* he felt it was time his company presented "the facts to date" and was granted permission from the PA to set the record straight publicly.

The document gives information on ten aspects of the project, including the farmers/tenants issue, an agricultural study and the course's economic impact.

"Many (media correspondents) have only a very vague idea of AX Holdings' plans for the proposed golf course and tend to magnify their misconceptions out of proportion, thereby misleading, whether intentionally or not, the opinion of the general public," the introduction states.

The document traces the history of golf in Malta over the past 40 years and highlights how the Verdala site was identified by the Government as suitable for an 18-hole course "on the basis of its geographically central location, the natural terrain and the proximity of good hotel accommodation" as far back as 1973.

The benefits to be reaped from the project, according to the document, are environmental, economic and social, as it secures the long-term future of the site with positive environmental management; is a stimulus to local and national economy, employment and tourism; and presents opportunities for new forms of recreation and leisure.

AX Holdings says the wastage of quality agricultural land is one of the major myths surrounding the project. It explains that the total area earmarked for the project is 72 hectares, of which 22.2 will be taken up by fairways and greens; 15.3 hectares of the remaining area will be used for vineyards, olive trees and fruit trees to be cultivated by the existing tenants. The rest (34.5 hectares) will consist of open spaces, rubble walls, and areas retained for ecological reasons.



THE proposed golf course at Rabat superimposed over the existing landscape

The document claims that a survey carried out by the farmers shows that most of the land is not being intensively farmed, with some 60 per cent being used for fodder production. The gross income from one hectare of fodder is less than Lm400 a year compared to an average gross income of Lm3,000 a year for grapes.

The land is making a small agricultural contribution and is currently not producing at its maximum agricultural potential. Present limitations on infrastructure – water availability and water storage facilities – require considerable investment. The significant fragmentation of the land resulting from various small parcels of land in the area is also a limitation.

AX Holdings have earmarked Lm500,000 for cash compensation to the local farmers, hardly a "pittance" as has been claimed in the Press.

The company would be investing Lm230,000 in vineyards (Lm15,000 per hectare). The guaranteed income to tenants would be around Lm57,000 a year, over Lm3,000 per hectare. This annual income would be generated by using only 20 per cent of the land earmarked for the golf course; the figure is nearly double the Lm30,000 (Lm400 per hectare) currently generated per annum by the whole area, according to the farmers' survey.

Not one farmer earns his living from this land only. The seven full-

time farmers working the land have land elsewhere. The other 80-odd farmers are part-timers who earn their livelihood from other employment.

The company said 92 farmers have presented a petition against the golf course to the Vatican (the land is the property of the Joint Office), but the farmers who endorsed the petition do not all own land within the project's proposed boundaries.

Agriculture

AX Holdings is encouraging the farmers to continue to work the area in the vineyards which will be kept between the fairways since their income would exceed what they are currently earning with less hardship. AX Holdings would provide the necessary investment.

The tenants are being offered the necessary training and will also be provided with the roots and drip irrigation and water supply.

The land currently contributes Lm30,000 to the economy but will generate around Lm60,000 per annum to the farmers and around Lm10 million worth of economic activities to the Maltese tourism product.

Since local grape supply does not satisfy demand, AX Holdings says the opportunity of planting 15.3 hectares of land with vines (or as farmland for other crops) at the Verdala golf course

should be taken seriously. The vineyard areas are planned to occupy the perimeter, so it does not obstruct the golf activity. Individual vineyards will be kept larger than one hectare to allow for economic management.

Several detailed studies have been undertaken in accordance with the PA's terms of reference for the EIA, including studies of the course development area's general physical parameters, a field by field survey, the economic aspects of agriculture practice, an assessment of the impact due to loss of land, and a description of mitigation measures.

Numerous soil samples were analysed for a range of physical and chemical properties at the Soil Analysis Laboratory of the Government Agricultural Experimental Farm at Ghammieri. The soils have not shown any major salinity problems, although conductivity values are sometimes high.

The developers will only make use of organic farming methods and biodegradable products in a planned and contained manner. Consultants have identified a suitable grass for the fairways, the bulk of the golfing area, which requires less fertilizers and pesticides and which can withstand the dry summer. Indigenous plants and grass will occupy the rough areas.

AX Holdings insist that the area's

topography will remain unchanged. Existing features will be kept and rubble walls will be restored and maintained. The course will be a haven for bird life. In winter, the company claims, it will be difficult to distinguish the course from the surroundings.

The course is expected to consume 70,000 cubic metres, on average, of additional water a year. Only necessary areas will be irrigated. The project requires 98,000 cubic metres a year to maintain 15 hectares of cultivation and 22.2 hectares of golf course.

The project will only use water sources which are currently untapped and going to waste. There are plans to convert an old quarry into a large reservoir for water currently draining away through Qormi and Marsa into the sea.

Foreign investment

Regent International Hotels, which is to manage the Verdala Hotel, are to upgrade it to a deluxe. They have agreed to take up 10 per cent of the total equity of the hotel project. (Another international chain was originally interested in the project but pulled out because of the lengthy delays.)

CCA International are ready to invest 50 per cent in the golf course project.

The additional tourist expenditure expected as a result of turning Malta into an acceptable golf tourist destination is Lm7.2 million a year due to the 21,600 additional 'average' tourists, and another Lm2.5 million due to another 10,400 five-star category tourists specifically targeted for the business conference market.

The resulting impact on the GDP is around Lm5.4 million; some 735 jobs will be created. Taxes and other revenue are expected to reach Lm2.7 million a year.

The document concludes the golf course is one facility that would encourage more visitors to Malta during the winter, especially since the weather is so favourable. Besides, the course is a sustainable development as no buildings would be erected on the slopes.

"Unfortunately, we are a nation which generally objects to all kinds of changes. The Maltese tend to resist change. We must admit that, as has been proven in the past, progress generates wealth and improves the standard of living for all concerned," it states.

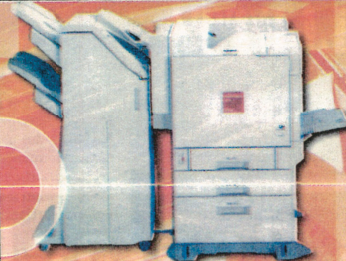
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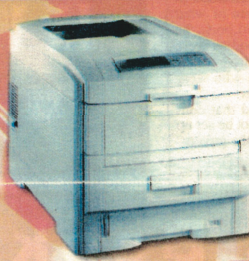
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