



A plan forming part of the environmental impact assessment showing the layout of the course and other facilities.

Proposed golf course in Rabat

Environmental assessment says benefits outweigh negative impact

An environment impact assessment of the proposed golf course in Rabat concludes that the "sustainability benefits" of the scheme outweigh the adverse impact, and would bring significant economic benefits to the economy.

With the EIA, the 'golf ball' is back at the feet of the Planning Authority, which is now studying it after it was presented to the authority by prospective developer AX Holdings in November.

The EIA, which cost AX Holdings Lm100,000, was conducted under the terms stipulated by the PA through the services of some 16 consultants. It was carried out by Land Use Consultants of London and Planning Services Consultancy, Malta.

It assesses the positive and negative impact of an 18-hole course on the slopes of the Grand Hotel Verdala at Tal-Virtu.

The PA is considering the golf course application on its own after it was separated from an application for the upgrading of the Grand Hotel Verdala jointly with the golf course over a year ago.

The EIA notes the loss of good quality agricultural land and of characteristic features such as rubble walls, but it also highlights the important economic benefits which would be derived from the

proposed development.

A survey on agriculture in the area concludes that most of the land is not being intensively farmed, with around 60 per cent of it being used for fodder production.

According to the survey, if current land use in the proposed area were partly replaced with the currently most profitable crop, vines, this would generate more than four times the current total agricultural production for the area in financial returns alone.

AX Holdings chairman Angelo Xuereb said he was confident that all the points raised in the terms of reference were addressed in an objective manner without any interference from the developers.

The EIA was carried out under the most exhaustive terms of reference imaginable, Mr Xuereb said.

"I was astonished by the depth with which the consultants treated the various subjects in the EIA," Mr Xuereb said.

The consultants carrying out the survey spoke to the farmers' association and among others met non-governmental organisations for feedback.

Speaking about the benefits of a golf course, Mr Xuereb said: "Malta is diversifying its product to go up-market and therefore it has to provide the facilities that are

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demand by this category of tourism. A golf course and conference business fit in perfectly."

Mr Xuereb said much had been done to provide good hotels that compare well with the best in Europe, but not enough accent was placed on providing the right facilities.

He said that although agricultural land would be lost because of the proposed development, the areas left for agriculture would yield more than the whole area yields now because vineyards would be planted. Olive trees would also be planted.

The EIA contains a study of the significance of predicted impacts and proposes mitigation measures.

The consultants have assessed topics such as geology, agriculture, the landscape, ecology, cultural heritage, water and drainage, viticulture, socio-economics and air quality among other topics.

The demand for golf and the economic feasibility of the project was also analysed, confirming there is a strong demand for golf both among prospective visitors and residents.

The report also says that a golf

course and country club, developed in association with the Grand Hotel Verdala would bring significant economic benefits to the economy.

The merits of alternative sites for the development of a golf course have also been considered, but they were discarded for reasons of economic feasibility necessitating supplementary development and hotels or for reasons such as access and lack of soil among other factors.

The EIA also noted that a call for tenders to sell the Grand Hotel Verdala in 1994 included proposals for an international 18-hole golf course on the slopes beneath the hotel.

Overall, the EIA says, the proposed development is broadly consistent with structure plan policies but there are a small number of exceptions.

One of these is the fact that the development would involve the loss of good agricultural land and the loss of some important landscape features, notably rubble walls.

According to the EIA the loss of existing agricultural production potential would be offset to a certain extent by the creation of vineyards.

The various mitigation measures proposed would go some way to reduce the impact and in some cases would give rise to environ-

mental enhancements.

The report concludes that a permanent impact of the project would be that people living nearby would lose the income they derived from the land and would see part of their lifestyle disappear. The character of the land would also be changed.

But the EIA states that the proposed scheme would also bring environmental, economic and social benefits. The scheme would secure the long-term future of the site based on agreed land management principles.

The golf course would attract a new profile of visitors to Malta, consistent with the policy of the Malta Tourism Authority.

The construction and operation of the scheme would result in new employment, the majority of which would be taken up by local people.

Lastly, the scheme would add a new leisure and recreation facility producing short and long-term benefits.

The EIA also delves into the 'do nothing scenario' saying that this scenario would jeopardise the diversification of Malta's tourist product.

Potential income and other economic benefits could be lost and it is assumed that the site would remain predominantly in low productive agricultural use.