

NEWS

Proposed golf course would generate 200 jobs

Fiona Galea Debono

A public information exhibition on the proposed Rabat golf course was opened yesterday at St James Cavalier.

The developers, AX Holdings, have been given the green light by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority to release details from their environment impact assessment to the public, Anglu Xuereb, chairman, said.

The EIA for the proposed golf course was the most complex study that had ever been carried out in Malta since the PA was set up, Mr Xuereb said.

AX Holdings Ltd had presented its first application over seven years ago.

The golf course project was supported by *Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna*, the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association and the Farmers Wine Cooperative Society Ltd, whose representatives were present at the launch.

Mr Xuereb said leading international companies were ready to invest in the project – CCA International would be investing 50 per cent in the golf course and Regent Hotels International would be investing 10 per cent in the Verdala hotel.

Other investors were interested and the developers were also considering the creation of a public company, he said.

Touching on a few principles on which the proposed Verdala golf course was based, Mr Xuereb said it respected the terraced features and did not involve any significant excavation on the blue clay slopes, which could lead to instability.

Where possible, the design retained the existing characteristics of the site such as rubble walls, important trees and archaeological features.

The majority of the 15,000 metres of rubble walls are in a state of disrepair and the project would involve the building of 8,500 new walls, using strictly traditional methods.

The golf course has been designed to exclude the area around part of a wall of ancient Mdina discovered recently.

Nor did the project incorporate the scarp slope from Tal-Virtu to Saqqaja because it was of ecological importance.

As regards water, seashore *paspalum* – a type of grass that was highly resistant to drought and harsh weather conditions and required half the amount of water that other turfs needed – has been identified. Alternative water sources, which have not yet been tapped, are to be used to obtain the 78,000 cubic metres of water per year, Mr Xuereb said.

Research by consultants has shown that



Anglu Xuereb (left) shows FWA president Mario Farrugia an impression of the proposed Verdala golf course.

the majority of the land was worked by part-time farmers, half of whom considered farming to be part of their lifestyle and would be adversely affected by the loss of their land.

The other half, who also included some of the full-time farmers, were ready to consider a form of compensation, or alternative employment.

Of the 90 tenants, only seven were full-time farmers, and not one of them lived off the land alone. The tailor-made packages meant that every farmer would end up with an improved financial situation, with less suffering and possibly without having to work.

A third of the land would continue to be used for agriculture, he said.

The project would generate around 200 jobs and an additional spending of Lm2.8 million by tourists, which would result in an impact of Lm1.8 million on the GDP. It

would also boost the economy of Rabat and Mdina.

The proposed golf course would improve the environment, attract tourists of a higher level and lengthen the tourist season.

Tunisia, Cyprus, Greece and Turkey, as well as Sicily, were investing in golf courses and Malta could not afford to fall behind the competition.

Mr Xuereb also pointed out that the project was reversible and that the golf course could be changed back to fields in the eventuality of a crisis.

Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna president Mario Farrugia said the foundation had been given the go-ahead by AX Holdings Ltd to monitor the golf course project, which is being developed in a sensitive area, to ensure that no damage was done and nothing of archaeological relevance was lost.

Farmers Wine Cooperative Society Ltd

president Rita Schembri said the cooperative was looking for land for vineyards to produce quality wines. The 80 farmers and their families were hoping to have the use of the land of the proposed golf course, allocated for agricultural purposes, in their hands.

Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association president Anthony Chircop supported the golf course project, saying it was high time a decision was taken, hopefully in favour of the project.

The golf course would be a step towards the improvement of the tourist product and would serve to increase demand in the off-peak season.

The exhibition is open for a month and the public is urged to offer its feedback on the project, based on the facts that are now available. More information may be obtained on the web site www.golf-malta.info.