

Last cab out of Palace Square

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The last cab to leave Palace Square in Valletta, yesterday. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The horse-drawn cabs' stand on Palace Square, Valletta, was yesterday dismantled hours after a court turned down the request of 43 karozzini owners to stop the transport authority from relocating it.

Felix, a four-year-old horse, was the last to pull his carriage out of the square after which men from the Malta Transport Authority (ADT) pulled down the green stand.

A German family of three, who unknowingly boarded the piazza's last cab, said they thought it was a pity that horse-drawn cabs would not be seen trotting through the city centre in future.

"Malta's lost some history," the German woman said, adding she chose to board the carriage to view the capital in a different light and with some shelter from the sun.

Having said that, she added, she would be willing to walk to another stand to ride a horse-drawn cab through Valletta.

In May, the government unveiled a €1 million regeneration project for the square, also known as St George's Square, that includes paving it, turning it into a pedestrian-only area and relocating the cab stand to the outskirts of Valletta.

Two weeks ago the cab owners took the matter to court and filed an application for a warrant of prohibitory injunction against the ADT to stop it from going through with the relocation, even temporarily.

In their application, the 43 owners also called on the authority to change its plans to stop them from entering Valletta with their cabs, due to pedestrianisation, or from operating in the city centre.

The owners claimed they were self-employed and this was their main breadwinning activity. They had operated in the square for several years and most of their clients, who were tourists, visited the centre of Valletta.

The authority argued it would be abusing its powers if it allowed the karozzini stand to remain in a pedestrian zone and disrupt the embellishment project.

Reserving central areas for pedestrians was a normal procedure in many cities. The ADT argued that restrictions for vehicles had been in place for a number of years and the project to pedestrianise more areas meant vehicles would have to choose other routes.

After hearing the submissions of both sides, the court yesterday ruled that the point in issuing the requested warrant would be to ensure the cab owners' rights were protected. These rights had to be proven at prima facie level.

In this case, the court said, the cabs did not have a right to operate from a particular part of Valletta or pass through specific roads. That was a decision the ADT had to take to ensure its decision conformed with the aims and objectives of national economic planning, Chief Justice Vincent De Gaetano ruled.

Although the authority was not obliged to consult before deciding on such matters, consultation was advisable as it ensured the authority was providing a service to the public.

The court ruled that the right presumed by the cab owners did not exist at prima facie level and therefore it turned down their request for the warrant.

Five hours after the ruling was handed down, ADT personnel started dismantling works in the presence of police. They worked uninterruptedly and the only cab around was that belonging to Felix's owner who waited for his last customers to board from the square.