

## Plans to keep carnival afloat unveiled

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Bad weather wrought havoc to Carnival floats with the activities planned for yesterday, including the popular défilé and Grand Finale in Floriana being cancelled.

**Photo: Matthew Mirabelli.**

Carnival enthusiasts are asking the government to finance the building of 27 hangars, worth €1.5 million, where they will be able to build and shelter their floats from destructive rain, which yesterday led to the cancellation of closing celebrations.

With project plans in hand, they called on the government to keep the colourful tradition alive, asking for a plot of land in the Marsa and Valletta areas, where the hangars could be built.

But the request is more than a benign suggestion. Speaking during a press conference at Valletta's Freedom Square yesterday morning, a frustrated Jason Busuttil from the Carnival Participants' Association, threatened that if the government did not comply, the members would not build any floats next year.

He explained that after years of failed electoral promises and talks about carnival hangars, the association decided to do something about it and consulted a Spanish company that specialised in hangar construction and believed that, building a "carnival village", might also serve as a tourist attraction and form part of the Valletta rehabilitation project.

He said the plans for the 27 hangars, designed by the Spanish company, were yesterday handed over to the government soon after they were received by the association. He would not give further details about the company.

For the past 30 years, Mr Busuttil said, different political parties had promised to provide carnival float-builders with a place where to work and store their works. But nothing materialised and, year after year, bad weather during carnival ruined the papier machè floats and destroyed months of costly preparations, he complained.

The demand also followed the recent announcement that Fort St Elmo would be restored. Float builders who worked from there would no longer be able to use the premises, he pointed out.

Even though the government said they would be able to use the fort next year, Mr Busuttil said, he did not think this was likely because it was not possible to work in a building that was being restored.

Mr Busuttil said he had been informed that a hangar being used by float builders in Luqa had been sold without informing them.

Beyond that, he added, the rebuilding of City Gate might mean that, next year, it would not be possible to have the usual carnival celebrations in Valletta.

If nothing was done, traditional carnival celebrations could be threatened, he said.

In the circumstances, the association decided to take the initiative and contacted the Spanish company to design 27 hangars. Twenty two of them would be used to build the floats and the other five for dance rehearsals and sewing costumes. But for this to materialise they needed the government's help with funding and to provide a site somewhere between Marsa and Valletta.

The association has earmarked three areas: near the Marsa industrial estate, near the Park and Ride zone and close to the police garage in Floriana. It is, however, open for discussion.

Soon after the press conference, Mr Busuttil and other members of the association walked to the Office of the Prime Minister where they presented the project details to a government representative.

When contacted, a spokesman for the Culture Ministry (under whose responsibility carnival falls) said the ministry would be looking into the proposal as "we want to keep carnival, which is a tradition not to be lost".

The Malta Council for Culture and the Arts said that yesterday's festivities, including the traditional parade down St Anna's Street in Floriana held on the last day of carnival celebrations, had to be cancelled because of the bad weather.

Mr Busuttill said the association agreed especially since, by yesterday morning, many floats were badly damaged after spending a night out in the wind and rain.

