

Valletta local plan to be re-written for Piano

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Lawrence Gonzi will rubber-stamp new planning rules for Valletta, tailor-made for Renzo Piano's design for the capital city if the City Gate project is to be approved by MEPA. MEPA chairman Austin Walker told MaltaToday that "it would be a great loss" if Piano's project had to be hindered by local plans that could not be changed. "National projects of a certain scale, just like Smart City, require changes to local plans."

Despite slating his much maligned idea to take planning policy in his hands, Gonzi will still have to rewrite Valletta's planning rules just so Piano's designs can get the green light from MEPA. Issues concerning the architectural compatibility of Piano's designs with Valletta's urban conservation area make it likely that Structure Plan policies will have to change.

But Walker specified that no changes will take place before MEPA receives the application for Piano's project.

"The possibility of changes to Valletta's traffic management plan are being studied, but this will be decided upon receiving the application," Walker said, hazarding that any changes would be solely related to traffic issues. This involves the re-routing of traffic now that Piano intends removing the City Gate archway from which traffic into Valletta flows into the city.

However, a slew of policies from the Valletta local plan – the capital city's planning rules – must change in order to accommodate Piano's plan for a new parliament, a smaller entrance to Valletta, and turning the Royal Opera House remains into an open-air theatre.

As far as Malta's planning rules are concerned, it is no secret that MEPA officers writing local plans tend to take into consideration future projects and various corporate and national interests in the use of land.

The draft plans then get issued for public consultation and must be approved by Parliament to be officialised. But it could be years for a draft plan to be actually presented by the minister responsible to parliament.

Gonzi's plans for MEPA reform included taking policy directly in the hands of his office, but this was dropped this week after critics lambasted the idea. They said it would be a return to the politician-driven planning processes of the past.

"Until now we have to see whether planning policies related to the buildings will have to

be changed. But until we actually receive the application, any comment is superfluous,” Austin Walker told MaltaToday yesterday.

Michael Falzon – the former minister who created MEPA – writes in MaltaToday (page 18) that Piano’s project is objectionable if a strict reading of Structure Plan policies is applied. “It’s the perfect project that makes MEPA’s rules irrelevant and short-sighted,” he writes.

Falzon says Piano’s designs would be refused in theory because of at least 15 policies which make the City Gate project incompatible with Valletta’s character and urban design.
