

The Gozo Rural Airfield

The Gozo Business Chamber's Feedback to the Consultation being conducted by the Gozo Regional Development Authority on behalf of the Ministry for Gozo

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THE GOZO BUSINESS CHAMBER

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1. A general Overview of the Project

The extension of the existing runway and the regeneration of the present facilities on the island of Gozo will have a significant impact on the socio-economic development of the island. The creation of new jobs and the development of another avenue of accessibility for the island are two major impacts that this important project would have. Apart from that such an important development will be creating the infrastructure for the development of further services on the island, such as for example the creation of additional services linking Gozo to other islands. The high quality tourism that it will be able to attract, and the potential to attract foreign direct investment are two important impacts that need to be considered. To this end the Chamber agrees with the positive impacts indicated in the Gozo Rural Airfield Regional Impact Assessment (p.9). Moreover the project is based on a sustainable approach, which is to be commended as it will be making use of the existing runway and the extension will be making use of disturbed territory within the area already earmarked within the local plan, thus not in any way impinging on any arable land currently being cultivated, and on sites where archeological remains are situated. Furthermore it will be making use of the present terminal which has been abandoned for many years.

Connectivity and accessibility are key for Gozo to continue to develop. Currently Gozo rests on one avenue of accessibility (the port of Mġarr) and two modes of service (the fast ferry and the Gozo Channel service). This situation is not an ideal one, and the Chamber believes that the proposed service while not invasive will ensure that this service will again be offered in Gozo after a long absence. This issue is acknowledged in the Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) whereby it is highlighted that:

Sea transport remains the sole mode of transportation connecting the two islands, which is however subject to weather conditions. Given dependence on this sole mode of transport, travel time between the two islands is often lengthy, affecting frequent commuters and businesses as well as causing traffic congestions from Cirkewwa to the central areas of Malta (p. 9).

2. The Economic Model

The Chamber agrees with the economic model to be operated. Though the present consultation phase concentrates principally on the investment required in the present infrastructure, it is already indicated that the intention is that the Government will be making the necessary investment in the infrastructure with the private sector operating both the facilities and the services between the two islands. This model has proved successful in the operation of the fast ferry service between the two islands, though the Government may eventually consider the need to subsidise certain services which may not seem viable but which in the end ensure that the operator or operators will offer a comprehensive schedule of services rendering the service a successful one. The inclusion of the Gozo airfield in the Ten-T network would be a step in the right direction.

The Gozo Business Chamber would like to comment on the labour costs indicated in the CBA (p. 27) whereby public sector wages are being considered for the costs of crew members. Such labour costs may need to be revisited as for such a highly specialised niche, and if this is eventually operated by the private sector, such wages would be much higher than the ones being indicated in the CBA.

3. The Socio-Economic Impact

In the Regional Impact Assessment an important positive of the proposed rural airfield is the saved time (p. 10) between Gozo and the mainland. The concept of saved time is an important one for Gozo. The time to be saved is not only for workers but will also help the tourism industry and ancillary services on the island.

Though the Gozo Channel operates a good scheduled service between the two islands the heavy usage of the service especially during weekends leads to an extra amount of time lost by tourists who would like a direct transfer between their accommodation and Gozo. On Sundays operators of direct transfers many a times take their patrons in the morning due to the heavy usage of the Gozo Channel service on Sunday afternoons. This leads to the dissatisfaction of tourists who have their return flights on Sundays.

It is also important for direct check-in to be available eventually for any inter-island service to function effectively. The method of operation should be the same available for connecting flights. Having to check-in two times would eventually hinder the take-up of the service. Moreover the transfer time from landing at Luqa airport to the terminal should be the minimum possible. The gains to be obtained from this service should not be off-set by delays at Luqa airport, which would eventually render the use of this service not practical. Moreover, the use of a larger aircraft which could operate within the proposed airfield should be considered. While the Chamber understands the underlying concern on sustainability a good capacity would ensure an optimum take-up of the service from its inception.

It is important to note that the consultation also takes into consideration the noise quality, and that the design, times of aircraft operations and procedures will be structured in such a way to limit the noise level to the minimum possible. The same applies for the consideration on noise pollution.

From an economic point of view it is important to note that the service may lead to the creation of a "general aviation eco-system" obviously within specific niches. It is also important to note that the operation of the inter-island transport as indicated in the CBA (p.27) would require 18 crew members which could mean direct employment in a specific niche that would benefit the island of Gozo. The generation of 15 Full Time Equivalent jobs from general aviation activities is also being noted (CBA, p. 30).

4. Sustainability

Sustainability is an over arching concept which permeates the whole consultation. The Chamber considers this an important element of this project and one which should be considered for all projects being done on the island. The fact that the project will utilize the minimum amount of land possible, and that it is considering the operation of an all electric STOL aircrafts by 2025, and will be included in the tender document for the operation of the inter island air transport, is an important step in the right direction. It is also important to note that as indicated in the CBA (p.26) will ensure eco-responsibility through light pollution control measures, noise abatement procedures, and the promotion of e-commute vehicles for travellers visiting Gozo. An all electric fleet of support ground vehicles is being proposed (Project Description Report, p. 21). It is also important to note that no buildings are being proposed as part of this development.

5. Conclusion

The Gozo Business Chamber strong believes that this project will benefit the island region of Gozo in many ways. Similarly to the introduction of the fast ferry service, any project impacting positively Gozo's accessibility should be actively considered and implemented. Considering that Gozo was for a significant period of time served through an air link, this project is an important initiative which will build on current infrastructure. It is also economically sustainable considering the potential demand from certain specific sectors. The detailed studies undertaken, taking also into consideration some indications provided in this response, and also from other stakeholders, will ensure that this service would be introduced for the benefit of the whole Gozitan community and the national economy. The latter is an important point, considering that as reiterated various times the diversification of the Gozitan economy will ensure that Gozo will no longer be considered ancillary to the national economy, but an active contributor to it. Considering the impact, and also the financial layout when compared to other national

projects that have been undertaken this is an initiative which is implementable and would boost Gozitan economy and society both in the short and long term.
