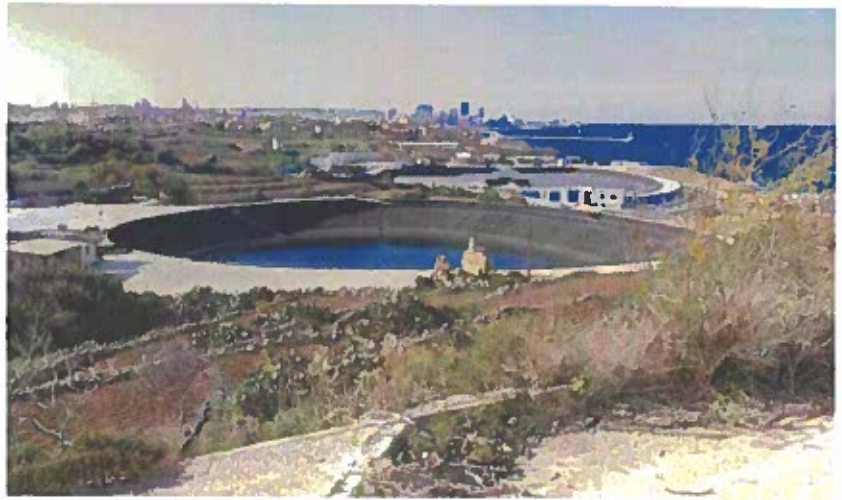


## NATIONAL

# Golden cheques for the silver screen

How Malta is throwing around millions to attract blockbusters



Malta Film Studios in Kalkara. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

IVAN MARTIN

Malta has dramatically increased the amount of money handed out to foreign film companies in a bid to attract more blockbusters to the island but industry insiders say it may be a gamble doomed to backfire.

The new payment system, introduced quietly in the lead up to the last election, will see large-scale film and TV productions go from receiving up to a €200,000 cash injection to cover the cost of on-screen talent to a new maximum of €5 million.

The payment caps for behind-the-lens employees have also been rejigged.

These are over and above tax rebates which productions can apply for.

Film Commissioner Johann Grech and government sources have defended the move saying it will generate millions of euros in economic activity.

Meanwhile, local industry players have questioned whether the government is simply throwing money at large production companies to bring big-name films to the island for little more than "personal vanity".

The matter was raised by the executive producer of a new Napoleon bio-pic which was partially shot in Malta earlier this year.

In a recent interview with industry publication *Deadline*, Aidan Elliot, who works with director Ridley Scott, described Malta's new system as "the most generous cash rebate in the world".

"It just absolutely cemented our decision to go there because not only did we have this great location and backdrop but we also had this incredibly, incredibly generous cash rebate," he is quoted as saying.

"We took around 500 people to Malta and we were able to get the rebate on all of those people and that equipment," he added.

What is a cash rebate system? Malta's system dates back to 2005 when the island was first trying to emerge as a filming location for large-scale productions.

At the time, Malta offered to pay back up to 20 per cent of the cost of on-screen talent to a maximum of €200,000. This increased to 25 per cent when Labour was first returned to

power in 2013 and then pushed up again to 40 per cent in 2019.

Then, on the eve of the 2022 election, the government increased the capping from €200,000 to €5 million for what are known as above the line costs, that is, actors, producers and directors.

The parameters for below the line – meaning crew – have also been made more generous too, opening it up to cover non EU nationals.

Industry sources say this means that the film commission will likely overshoot its €9 million financial allocation for these rebates by about 300 per cent.

They raise doubts over whether these large productions leave that much in the economy in the first place and if the money could be better spent.

"The question immediately crops up: is it worth it? Of course, we will only know in a few years' time but this is a lot of money to be throwing around, especially when so little is given to support the local industry," a local film operator said on condition of anonymity.

Replying to questions sent last week, Grech said improvements to the cash rebate programme had been introduced "in order to remain competitive within the global film and TV market, securing more projects and creating more local jobs."

The film commissioner added that the new cash rebate programme in Malta has a strict skills test aimed at encouraging productions to engage local crew.

## Mayor to go to court if Hondoq project approved

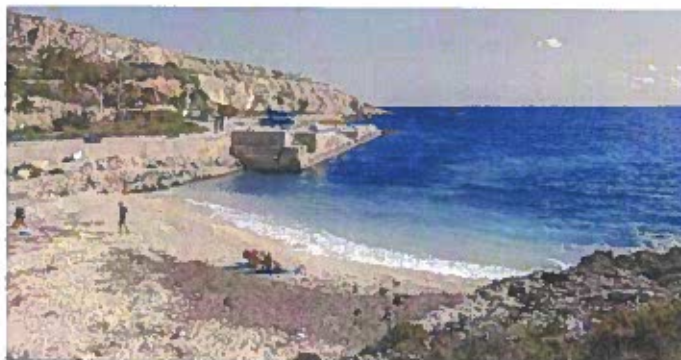
IVAN MARTIN

Outspoken Qala mayor Paul Buttigieg says he will take to the courts should a major development in Gozo's scenic Hondoq Bay be given the thumbs up by a planning body this week.

A planning appeals board will tomorrow meet to determine the fate of Hondoq Bay after a 20 year saga threatening the unspoilt stretch of Gozitan coastline finally draws to a conclusion.

The PA's Environment Planning Review Tribunal will be handing down its final decision on an application to build a hotel and parking facilities as well as 25 villas, 60 apartments and 200 multi-owner properties at the site.

Buttigieg, however, said he is already prepared to head straight to court and block the development should the planning body give it the green light tomorrow. "You can rest assured that we will not just let this go ahead," he said.



A planning appeals board will tomorrow meet to determine the fate of Hondoq Bay. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

"If the unthinkable happens and this project is approved, we won't just lie down and let the destruction of Hondoq take place. I will personally go to court and appeal to block it," he added.

Buttigieg has been spearheading the fight to save Hondoq ir-Rummien from development for decades.

Last year, he wrote to MPs insisting that the site should be declared public

domain by parliament to protect it from development.

He says that this has come at great cost to him personally and claims he has been on the receiving end of attempts to derail his political career because of his activism.

The 104,000-square metre mega development by Gozo Prestige Hotels dates to 2002 and has been the subject of a two-decade battle by Buttigieg and a group of objectors who say the proposed project will turn the slice of seaside into a construction eyesore.

The proposal had been unanimously rejected by the Planning Authority board in June 2016, in what many thought was the end of the road.

The developers appealed the refusal, however, arguing that their right to a fair hearing had been denied as they were given only 15 days to prepare for the PA hearing.

The appeal will now finally be heard tomorrow.