



The Formentera Council convened its plenary members today for the first public discussion of the state of the island. The event included the participation of all parties with plenary representation in the Council. According to regulations, the yearly gathering must take place in the first six months of the year. President Jaume Ferrer, the first to take the floor, spoke about the general state of local affairs, reviewed the administration's recent efforts and outlined the overarching tenets that guide the Council's action in the tenth year since Formentera's local government was established.

In the words of President Ferrer, the ten years since the Council's creation have been marked by a return to self-governance: "Now any errors or miscalculations on sensitive local issues are, at the core, the result of decisions made by locally elected policymakers". Having an island council, he went on, has increased the role played by local stakeholders. "It's not the same to be one of 67 Balearic municipalities as it is to be one of four island councils," he pointed out.

Discussion on the state of the island

The president recalled how measures agreed on at last year's discussion had been given priority treatment during the previous year.

Eighteen accords from across the political parties were reached in 2016. Headway has been made on every one of the initiatives, Ferrer said, holding up two points as evidence: first, the administration now uses the Formentera Day Centre's conference room for plenary sessions, and second, a study and subsequent discussion took place concerning the Council's history on the island, another initiative first tabled at last year's gathering.

Community involvement

"Here on Formentera we are immensely lucky to have a society where people are involved in civic life," the president observed. He cited the second round of "participatory budgets," an initiative to enlist Formentera associations in the selection of projects that will receive funding from the administration. Twenty-eight proposals were heard and are currently being narrowed down. Ultimately, €325,000 will be made available to the projects that win the most support.

According to Ferrer, the months ahead will see the administration mapping out three important sector-specific directives, on waste management, youth, equality and mobility. For each, the Council will seek to engage the community via the island's league of associations, el Consell d'Entitats. On that note, he affirmed, local residents are also called upon to make decisions about changes at the town level. Recent meetings in la Savina have centred on dialoguing with residents about building works planned for that area and similar gatherings have been scheduled concerning improvements in Sant Ferran.

Housing

One issue received particular emphasis in the president's address: the local housing crunch. "We're working with the Govern Balear in every way possible," he pledged, while noting that the Palma administration retains authority on issues of housing. "We've created the means for local residents to participate in a study of the current situation, a measure adopted at this same event last year," he said. He also highlighted the upcoming rollout of new low-cost public housing rentals, flats built with sustainable materials and techniques on plots that were handed over by the Formentera Council.

The local government is also pouring resources into stemming rentals of available homes to tourists. Rules on tourist rentals, first, and inspections, second, have already begun to pay off, Ferrer remarked. The majority of the island is now aware that publicising the rental to tourists of one's home without the corresponding permits is illegal and will entail fines.

Two other matters Ferrer reckoned are instrumental to quality of life and dignity for all are an elderly care centre and a funeral home. Studies are currently under way to construct the buildings on land adjacent to the Formentera Day Centre and hospital.

According to the president, a senior care centre will mean that the realities of advanced age and failing health no longer require Formentera's aged to leave the island.

The funeral home, currently awaiting public tendering, will no doubt be a reality sooner. In Ferrer's words, the site, "a place to bid family, friends and neighbours farewell with intimacy and dignity," represents a leap forward.

Sport

Ferrer also underscored the role of sport in cultivating not only healthy-living habits but also teamwork and camaraderie.

“Having launched the athletics school and a year into our promotion of positive values in sport,”—an initiative which, according to Ferrer, has served as a benchmark for a similar region-wide programme—“it's now time to turn our attention to the new windsurf school, which will begin classes this summer at the future site of la Savina's nautical sports centre”.

Sant Ferran, cultural centre

Proffering that “in the very near future, Sant Ferran will become the cultural epicentre of Formentera,” Ferrer signalled the need to relocate “the bulk of Formentera's cultural infrastructure and services to that town”.

With the remodel of Sant Ferran's primary school expected to be completed between late 2018 and early 2019, Ferrer intimated the school's current facilities could take on new life as “services and activities that lend themselves to culture, craft work, music and the performing arts”.

Defending the island

In his address the president said a renewed commitment would be made to beautify the island's rural areas and landscapes. “This year, the Formentera Council,” he announced, “we will once again be offering help to residents who repair stone walls, bury utility cables and revamp protected heritage sites like ranch homes, windmills, waterwheel, cisterns and wells”.

Looking ahead to summer, Ferrer drew attention to what he called the island's main challenge: “The abundance of watercraft seeking to drop anchor on Formentera's shore”. In this vein, the president highlighted an additional €200,000 in funding from the Govern, “instrumental to strengthening the island's moorage info service, which we hope this year will include the area from Cala Saona to Punta Prima and even Es Caló”.

Ferrer highlighted outreach and fundraising around the recently launched “Save Posidonia Project” and signalled a forthcoming campaign to raise awareness about a new toll-free hotline to report incidents like illegally dumped waste and malfunctioning streetlights.

President Ferrer pledged the Council would sustain its commitment to protecting the island's countryside. He highlighted a renewed plan with the local farmers' cooperative to maintain the farmland reserve and other initiatives.

Sustainable mobility

In addition, Ferrer reaffirmed the administration's commitment to green transport and pointed to a recently signed partnership with Citroën to promote the company's e-Méhari.

On islandwide mobility, the president assured attendees that the Council is in talks with the Govern on the issue of summer crowds and on the idea of imposing selective access across sites such as sa Tanca d'Allà Dins in es Cap de Barbaria.

Taking stock of the Council's ongoing building works, Ferrer affirmed that the current swath of large projects under the Council's watch are nearing termination. He also recalled efforts this winter to take the Formentera model to Iceland, Berlin, Madrid, London and other places whose residents would respond well to a unique, natural and tranquil environment like Formentera. As Ferrer noted, one issue that still awaits resolution concerns financing for local-level tourism promotion. In the region, Mallorca recently unveiled its Palau de Congressos, a multimillion-euro exhibition centre paid for by the entire Balearic Islands community, while funding still remains an issue. The current agreement, Ferrer asserted, is unfair and the administration will continue to call for an overhaul.

Punta Prima court case shelved

Lastly, the president spoke about Balearic courts' recent shelving of the Punta Prima case. Acknowledging that an appeal from the other side remained possible, Ferrer nevertheless pointed to the ruling's strong wording as evidence that Formentera had upheld the law. Representatives of the other parties debated the content of President Ferrer's address and the gathering concluded.

From the close of the evening and until tomorrow, parties can float propositions for further discussion. Such issues will be addressed, debated and voted on in a subsequent extraordinary discussion session. The second gathering will be held next Friday at 8.00am in the administration's plenary hall, located in the Formentera Day Centre.

