

The man responsible for legalising mixed land use defends his proposal and explains why it's a lot better than what the CM and the MPs wanted.

With a power point presentation on Delhi's power situation and a copy of an article he wrote on the power crisis that never got published due to what he thinks was the pressure of a corporate, Minister of State for Urban Development Ajay Maken is well prepared as he comes in to lunch at the capital's elitist club, India International Centre. As for the facts concerning the latest development, his decision to amend the city's master plan as a response to the courts ordering the sealing of buildings housing shops and offices in residential areas, Maken's got them at his fingertips, write Business Standard.

It's unfair to say, he says, as we struggle with our order, that he's legalising corruption and law-breaking in the city. I go for some lamb chops with mint sauce while, after doing the polite thing with the menu, Maken does what you do at IIC — you order dishes from memory! So, it's Chinese button mushrooms with fried rice and some pasta for him and Nistula.

You have to understand, the violations have been there for years, he begins the old spiel — we're just trying to fix things within this. In any case, he uses what he considers the ultimate ace, this is better than what Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit (once a mentor) and the MPs from Delhi wanted. They wanted an Ulhasnagar-style ordinance to legalise every building, whereas by laying down certain rules for commercial use of residential areas and insisting this be done only on the ground floor, and after traffic and parking studies are done, and on roads that are external to the colony, his proposal is less harmful. His proposal of charging shopkeepers enough to create two car parking spaces for every 100 square metres (apart from the conversion fees, from residential to commercial), he's done the math, will be enough to fund the creation of multi-storey car parks, since parking congestion is the real problem that mixed land use creates.

The problem, he reels out the facts, is that way back in 1962, the norm was set to have one shop for every 150 families. Yet, the DDA which was the only authority allowed to develop commercial space, has developed just 16 per cent of the commercial space required! Naturally, then, shops had to come up in unauthorised spaces.

What of the courts? Since they've ordered the MCD to seal the buildings, isn't he just cocking

a snook at them by changing the law? There was a meeting last week on Saturday, he says, where his boss Jaipal Reddy, Delhi CM Dikshit, the Solicitor General and the MCD's lawyer were present, and the law officers reported the Supreme Court's reaction was quite favourable — the newspapers reported the opposite. "Otherwise, they'd have struck it down," he says.

What if the colonies where the encroachment has happened don't have more space for the car park? The commercialisation will not be allowed there, he promises. As for our fears of the authorities such as the MCD (once again) turning a blind eye to all the safeguards he's proposed, Maken agrees that's a real problem. Maybe the courts can appoint monitoring committees, he says, implicitly acknowledging the executive's failed at its job.

What of his New Delhi constituency that is dominated by bureaucrats? Since he's seen as the man who legalised corruption, won't they punish him in the next election? Not at all, he smiles, we've announced the Pay Commission, so they're quite happy with us.

"I agree with my chief minister," he says theatrically, "that the MCD needs to be broken up." He goes one step forward, elaborating his favourite theme. Today, municipal wards cater to about one lakh residents — this needs to be brought down to around a tenth and no politicians should be allowed to contest. Once this happens, the councillors will be much more answerable to citizens and things will be different, he avers.

We turn the topic to his seeming to disown responsibility for things gone wrong, his volte face on power privatisation, for instance, though he was the minister in charge of this in Delhi. No, I support the proposal, Maken says, but the implementation after he left was the problem. He takes us through an article he wrote after being invited by a leading national daily, but which never got published since it hit at Anil Ambani and the Tata-owned distribution companies (discoms). He has cited figures to show the discoms paid Rs 1,000 crore less for the power they bought in 2004-05, as compared to the original projections, so where's the question of a tariff hike? A power point is brought in to answer our criticism that in his hurry to complete the deal, his consultants wildly underestimated the investment required to fix the system — each Rs 100 crore extra leads to a 0.5 per cent hike in tariffs. Absolutely, he agrees, and says the regulator had no business to allow the discoms to get away with this. No, the initial estimate was correct, he insists.

Maken says he agrees with Professor Dinesh Mohan of IIT Delhi who gives figures to show a well-designed bus system can probably carry as many passengers as a metro, and says that as

Delhi's transport minister he was responsible for clearing the proposed 19 km stretch from Ambedkar Nagar to ISBT including the complete remodeling of the street (the buses run in the centre of the road) — after he left, Maken boasts, the project got grounded. In which case, why did he, as Delhi's transport minister and now in the urban affairs ministry at the Centre, support the metro — after all, if you buy Mohan's arguments, as Maken says he does, the metro comes across as a huge albatross. Maken's a little off balance and star-struck here, and so says that any world city needs a metro and, in any case, Delhi can afford to have two parallel systems. Can it? Especially since, as he himself says, the subsidy to passengers on the metro is really huge.

So, as we order the staple honey fig ice-cream and apple pie with ice cream, we ask if he is ready to become the next chief minister of Delhi, given his open opposition to Dikshit and the fact that his current job gives him a chance to upstage her. Maken's no retiring wallflower, so the answer is not the usual Congress-one: I don't have the experience, I have a lot to learn ... Maken's more direct and says, "No, I have a lot of things to do in my present job."