

Greens celebrate victory as Safdie Plan is rejected

By Zafir Rinat
and Avi Bar-Eli

The National Planning and Building Council overwhelmingly rejected yesterday the controversial West Jerusalem construction project, known as the Safdie Plan, in a 24-3 vote.

The three "yes" votes came from representatives of the housing and communications ministries, while the Finance Ministry representative abstained. Following the vote Interior Ministry Director-General Ram Belinkov, who chairs the council, said "now we will consider how to continue development of Jerusalem, without the devices that the plan offered."

The Safdie Plan, which was the initiative of the Israel Lands Administration and the Jerusalem Development Authority and was named after its planner, architect Moshe Safdie, sought to provide a solution to forecasted population growth in Jerusalem, which points to a future shortage of tens of thousands of residential units in the city. The plan - stretching over 24,200 dunams and expected to include the construction of 20,000 residential units in the open areas west of the city - embodies one of the largest planning initiatives ever considered in Israeli planning institutions.

The plan encountered

fierce resistance from environmental groups, who said it would weaken the city center and seriously damage the natural environment and landscape. Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupoliansky recently joined the fray and announced his opposition to the plan.

The effort to defeat the plan was led by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) and the Coalition for the Preservation of the Jerusalem Hills. Its eventual rejection is one of environmental groups' greatest achievements.

The environmental organizations now intend to focus on preventing the construction of the road that was to serve as the main artery for the Safdie Plan neighborhoods. The road is currently awaiting final approval by the National Infrastructures Committee.

A report on land reserves prepared for the Planning Authority was publicized about one week ago, revealing that the city of Jerusalem has a surplus of land reserves enough to build 45,500 residential units by the year 2020, while the forecasted demand for that year totals between 33,500 - 45,500 units.

Nonetheless, city planner Tomer Gotoheif stressed in his report that the city should ensure that some of the construction in Jerusalem should

fit populations that aren't ultra-Orthodox, in order to preserve the balance between various groups in the capital.

According to an Interior Ministry statement, the vast majority of council members, including its chairman, were unconvinced of the plan's necessity, especially given the potential harm to open areas in West Jerusalem and primarily in terms of promoting and marketing land reserves slated for construction within the city.

"Twenty four votes against is a strong statement," said Menachem Zlotsky, head of the department of open areas in the Environment Ministry. "The message delivered by the planning authority is that that we should look inward, and act to strengthen Jerusalem from within."

Nonetheless, the council members did express concern regarding the development of Jerusalem, which is the poorest city in Israel and has ongoing negative immigration.

The biggest surprise during the debate was the opposition to the plan expressed by the head of the planning administration in the Interior Ministry, Shamaï Asif, who had in the past expressed support for implementing part of the plan. Asif said he was convinced that there is no rush to implement the plan, and that ways to plan Jerusalem from

within should be considered before plans to expand the city to additional areas.

Among the plan's supporters there was the sense yesterday that the city had suffered a blow that would especially harm its young, secular couples, who will be unable to afford homes in the city because of the short housing supply, which they say is because the plan is not being implemented.

"Jerusalem will miss the low apartment prices that existed prior to the cancellation of the Safdie Plan," said Israel Lands Administration Director Yaacov Efrati yesterday.

The Jerusalem Development Authority's official response was that it is studying the council's decision.

In a joint statement, the Coalition for the Preservation of the Jerusalem Hills and SPNI said: "This is a day of great victory for nature and the city. The council accepted our position that nature must be preserved for the sake of future generations. This is a struggle in which tens of thousands of citizens took part."

Lupoliansky said yesterday: "We are happy that the council reached the conclusion that development within the city must be emphasized, which will add over 40,000 housing units. At this time, all relevant bodies must work together to strengthen Jerusalem."