

# Panel puts final nail in Safdie Plan

## *Green areas west of Jerusalem spared*

• By ETGAR LEFKOVITS

A construction plan to expand Jerusalem westward was overwhelmingly rejected Tuesday by an Interior Ministry committee following a major public campaign by environmentalists who said that the project would irrevocably damage the Jerusalem landscape.

The proposal, named after the renowned architect Moshe Safdie who designed the original plan, would have seen the construction of 20,000 housing units on more than 26 square kilometers of natural woodlands and forests west of Jerusalem in one of the largest construction projects ever proposed in Israel.

The building plan, which

was frozen two months ago by Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski following one of the biggest environmental struggles in the country in years, was nixed by the Interior Ministry's national planning and building committee by a vote of 24-3 with one abstention.

Proponents of the city's westward expansion plan, including Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, had argued that it was essential for the natural growth of Jerusalem, with its notoriously high real estate prices, and continuing Jewish emigration.

They had also asserted that the plan was necessary since there was almost no room to build in Jerusalem, even though other studies indicated there was room for

such growth.

An Interior Ministry study released last month found that available land reserves should be able to supply the capital's housing demand until 2020.

The environmentalist groups which vociferously opposed the plan stressed that the plan would irrevocably alter Jerusalem's vistas and destroy the remnants of green open spaces around the city.

The final decision nixing the plan was quickly lauded by environmentalist groups and the city.

"This is a huge victory for nature and the city of Jerusalem for the future generations," a spokeswoman for the Society for the Protection

of Nature said.

"Now is the time to strengthen Jerusalem as Israel's capital by preserving the green areas around the city," the Jerusalem Municipality said in a statement, noting that 40,000 new apartments were already being planned in the city.

Lupolianski's dramatic about-face on the issue this winter followed years in which the city avidly backed the plan.

An alternate plan to build eastward to Ma'aleh Adumim has been frozen due to American opposition. Safdie has said that had the government approved an eastward expansion plan he never would have drawn up a proposal to expand Jerusalem to the west.