

# NO TO THE WESTERN EXPANSION OF JERUSALEM



Demonstration near Ein Heret/Photo: Yossi Kimhi

Jerusalem is Israel's largest city, both in terms of land area and number of residents. It stretches over 126 square kilometers, compared to 51.3 sq km in Tel Aviv and 59.3 sq km in Haifa. Its population reached 736,700 at the end of 2006, 10% of Israel's total population, and is expected to continue growing. The question of how best to accommodate this population within the jurisdiction of Jerusalem has occupied planners for decades.

Plans for the expansion of Jerusalem's jurisdiction westward have been around for a long time. Committees and investigators reviewed them throughout the 1990s. The Safdie Plan for the expansion of Jerusalem westward was no exception. But without doubt, this plan elicited opposition at a scale previously unknown in Israel, marking a landmark in the development of public participation in environmental planning in Israel.

Regional Outline Plan 37/1, better known as the "Safdie Plan" after the architect who designed it, is a regional master plan

delineating the land area to be added to the municipality of Jerusalem. The plan area spanned 26.6 square kilometers of open space on the ridges to the west of Jerusalem and called for the construction of about 20,000 housing units.

The Safdie Plan, first commissioned in 1997, was submitted to Jerusalem's Regional Planning and Building Commission in February of 2000. Exactly seven years later, in February of 2007, the National Planning and Building Board, Israel's highest planning body, canceled the plan.

## Major Components of the Safdie Plan

- > Mount Heret, near Mevasseret Zion - 7,400 housing units plus an employment center;
- > Lavan Ridge, including Moshav Orah and Moshav Aminadav and the southern slopes of the ridge toward the Refaim River: 10,000 housing units;
- > Givat Mitzpe Niftoach (Emek Ha'arazim), near the Ramot area: 2,000 housing units (within the framework of another planning process);
- > Half a million square meters of commercial and industrial space;
- > Infrastructure network;
- > Roads and bridges including a western ring road;
- > Metropolitan park in large areas of the Arazim, Soreq and Refaim Valleys.

## The Evolution of the Plan

It is not easy to plan for a city such as Jerusalem, Israel's capital city, holy to three major religions, poor in resources and home to a diverse, growing and often fragmented population, including



Jews and Arabs, secular and religious. Planning decisions for Jerusalem must take into consideration not only social, environmental and economic considerations but the political, demographic, religious and historical realities in a city characterized by diversity.

To understand the Safdie Plan, a short survey of the plans which preceded it is in order. In the late 1980s, in response to a request by the Jerusalem Municipality to annex areas to the west of the city, an investigation committee into Jerusalem's borders was commissioned by the government of Israel. The so-called Kubersky Committee (named after the director general of the Ministry of the Interior at the time) presented its recommendations in August of 1991. It recommended the annexation of some 16.5 square kilometers of land from the jurisdiction of the nearby Mate Yehuda Regional Council, although it stipulated that "plans for residential development in the annexed area will only be approved after the existing land potential is exhausted for this purpose in the present boundaries of the city and as per the recommendations of a follow up committee..."

The Jerusalem Municipality did not establish a follow up committee to review land reserves for development within the city, but rather, soon after the annexation, it commissioned Safdie Architects to determine the feasibility of developing these lands and to begin planning in the annexed area. But that's not all. At the same time, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Israel Lands Administration and the Ministry of Housing, as well as landowners in moshavim and other areas to the west of Jerusalem, began initiating a wide variety of unrelated plans in the newly annexed area. Initiatives for building schemes and roads on these lands were presented throughout the

1990s by each of these bodies, without comprehensive planning of any kind, based on ownership rights and vested interests alone. These initiatives, many of them involving grandiose building, threatened to transform wide open green spaces into mere green spots within a block of massive development, clearly an intolerable situation from the viewpoint of Israel's green organizations.

According to Shony Goldberger, director of the Jerusalem region of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, "There were dozens of plans by entrepreneurs prior to the Safdie plan, each pulling in a different direction. The Safdie plan, at the outset, was meant to provide a comprehensive planning approach to the areas to the west of Jerusalem, rather than allowing each body to do as it willed, which was the case in the early 1990s. We, at the ministry, were determined to protect the open areas to the west of Jerusalem from future threats to the largest degree possible, to base decisions on long-term planning and professional considerations."

Menachem Zalutski, director of the Open Space Division of the Ministry of Environmental Protection concurs: "The ministry was convinced of one

>The story of the Safdie Plan highlights the ability of the public to make a difference<

thing - that isolated building initiatives in the Jerusalem hills must be stopped. We set out to present our professional input from the start. We concentrated on programmatic and planning aspects, countering the claims of the proponents of the plans with irrefutable facts about the value and sensitivity of this open space. As a government ministry, we were not indifferent to Jerusalem's needs, and therefore, we initially set out to minimize the damages posed by the Safdie Plan, reducing building and development in certain areas and promoting wide-scale national parks and protected areas in other areas, based on in-depth professional analysis."

Along with a Green Forum of major green organizations in Jerusalem, which included the Nature and Parks Authority, the Jewish National Fund, the Society for



Schoolchildren in Mt. Heret observation point/Photo: Yossi Kimhi





## Safdie Plan: Proponents and Opponents

**Proponents:** Proponents, including the Jerusalem Municipality, the Jerusalem Development Authority and the Israel Lands Administration, argued that the plan would create crucial land reserves for residential development and for employment that would save the city from negative migration and strengthen it economically.

**Opponents:** Opponents, including Israel's green organizations, argued that the plan would weaken the core of the city by pulling people and financial resources away, would cause irreversible damage to ecosystems and species, would lead to the destruction of the green belt around Jerusalem which serves as a natural recreation area for residents of Jerusalem and central Israel and would cause environmental damage.

the Protection of Nature in Israel and the Israel Antiquities Authority, the Ministry of Environmental Protection invested major efforts in compiling and analyzing data on the natural, landscape, historic and archaeological assets in the Jerusalem hills. Based on studies conducted between 1997-1999, the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies then published a document entitled "The Jerusalem Hills and the Judean Plain: Conservation and Sustainable Development Policy," which sought to balance conservation and development and to provide a basis for future development plans for this unique area.

Yet, despite serious attempts to reconcile between opposing views concerning to the Safdie Plan, just when it seemed that an agreement could be reached in the spring of 2003 between the opponents and proponents of the plan, the compromise plan on the borders of the Safdie Plan fell through. The road toward cancellation of the Safdie Plan was set.

### Public Opposition to the Safdie Plan

An all out campaign to stop the Safdie Plan was initiated in 2002, when a group of 60 environmental and social organizations came together to form the Coalition for the Protection of the Jerusalem Hills. The Coalition worked on two main fronts: petitions, rallies, participation in public municipal meetings, and recruitment of the media and of Knesset members to rally public support for the plan's opposition; and professional reports targeted at refuting the claims of the plan's proponents.

In preparation for the deposition period of the plan, when the public is permitted to submit objections under the Planning and Building Law, the Coalition, headed by Att. Yael Elyashar, spearheaded an impressive and effective campaign against the Safdie Plan. The campaign

hit home: green organizations, private citizens, public figures and professionals submitted a record 16,000 objections to the National Planning and Building Board. Objections related to the consequences of the project - harm to the city center, damage to the environment, ecosystems, archaeological sites and recreational areas, and loss of a primary green belt for residents of the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv metropolitan areas.

At the same time, the Coalition continued its professional efforts to refute claims of a shortage of land reserves in Jerusalem. To counter these arguments, the Coalition for a Sustainable Jerusalem prepared its own report in 2005 (prepared by Uri Barshishat), indicating that there is ample land in Jerusalem for the construction of some 60,000 housing units, more than enough to provide for Jerusalem's population growth needs in the next two decades.



Hikers in Mt. Heret/Photo: Yossi Kimhi

### And Back to the National Planning and Building Board

The results of the impressive campaign waged by the Coalition for the Preservation of the Jerusalem Hills were not long in coming. In December 2004, the National Planning and Building Board appointed Att. Gideon Vitkon as an investigator charged with hearing objections against the plan. Although Vitkon recommended approving the plan, he noted that he could not verify the conflicting claims



regarding the availability of land reserves in the city which were made by the plan's entrepreneurs, on the one hand, and the Coalition for the Preservation of the Jerusalem Hills, on the other hand.

When the National Board next met on October 17, 2006, it decided to postpone its decision on the Safdie Plan by two months. During this time, an independent investigator (Tomer Gothelf) was charged with examining the contradictory claims of the city and the Coalition regarding the availability of land reserves in Jerusalem.

Soon after the decision to postpone, in November 2006, Jerusalem's Mayor **Uri Lupolianski** withdrew the city's support for the plan, in light of the claims of the green organizations. Three months later, in its meeting of February 6, 2007, the National Planning and Building Board decided to reject the controversial plan. The decision, approved by a majority of 24 to 3, with one abstention, was reached following the presentation of the report on land reserves in Jerusalem. The report estimated that some 45,500 housing units can be built on existing land reserves in Jerusalem alongside the expansion of some 15,000 existing units, enough to supply the city's housing demands until 2020.

Menachem Zalutski of the Ministry of Environmental Protection acknowledges that "a revolution occurred with the formation of the Coalition. We realized that we cannot limit the debate to the importance of green spaces alone, but have to relate to the implications of the plan on the future of Jerusalem. The ministry totally supported the position that the Safdie Plan cannot be approved in its proposed format due to its impacts on both the open spaces of the Jerusalem hills and on the city of Jerusalem itself. There was an identity of opinions between the position of the ministry and the position spearheaded by the Coalition."

## Milestones in the Birth and Demise of the Safdie Plan

- > 1991 – Recommendation of the Investigation Committee on Jerusalem's Borders (Kubersky Committee).
- > 1993 – *Borders of the Jerusalem Municipality and the Mate Yehuda Regional Council changed by adding 16.5 square kilometers to Jerusalem.*
- > 1997 – *Feasibility plan and preliminary planning of the annexed area by Safdie Architects.*
- > February 2000 – *Presentation of the plan to the Regional Planning Committee.*
- > March 4, 2003 – *Regional Planning Committee recommends depositing the plan with conditions.*
- > March 4, 2003 – *National Board recommends depositing the plan with conditions.*
- > July 7, 2003 – *Committee on Agricultural Land and Open Spaces decides to approve the plan on condition that every detailed plan will be submitted to it and that changes will be made to building capacities to densify construction.*
- > July 25, 2004 – *completion of the deposition period for the plan, with presentation of 16,000 objections.*
- > December 7, 2004 – *National Board approves the appointment of an investigator to hear objections to the plan.*
- > May 10, 2005 – *National Board decides to postpone the hearing of objections until deliberations in the Regional Planning Committee.*
- > June 29, 2005 – *Beginning of objection process which is completed on August 8, 2005. 140 opponents and respondents are heard.*
- > September 5, 2005 – *Draft of investigator report submitted.*
- > December 2005 – *National Planning and Building Board deliberates on the investigator's report, but does not reach a decision.*
- > October 17, 2006 – *National Planning Board decides to postpone deliberations on the Safdie Plan by two months for further investigation of differences of opinion concerning available land reserves in Jerusalem.*
- > February 6, 2007 – *National Planning and Building Board decides to reject the Safdie Plan.*



Ein Lavan pool/Photo: Menachem Zalutski



### An End and a Beginning

The story of the Safdie Plan highlights the ability of the public to make a difference. The plan sparked public opposition at a scale previously unknown in Israel. Some 16,000 objections were submitted to the plan, some 50 Knesset members from the right and the left of the political spectrum signed a petition against the plan, and the media mobilized in full force to cover the struggle. The success of the battle should renew the public's confidence in its ability to make its voice heard.

Yet, as the story of the Safdie Plan ends, another story begins. In the words of Avi Ben-Zur, environmental planner in the Jerusalem region of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, "ways must now be found to ensure that the densification of housing within Jerusalem takes consideration of quality of life issues. Infrastructure, roads, transport, public open space should all be taken into account when planning for residential development within the current borders of Jerusalem."

One thing is certain. Jerusalem's problems will not be solved by diverting people and resources to the open spaces of the Jerusalem hills. Ways must now be found to strengthen Jerusalem from within, by renewing the existing urban fabric, revitalizing the city center, developing a sustainable public transport system and encouraging business and employment opportunities.



## Some Recent Highlights in the Fight to Preserve Open Spaces

**2005:** Government approves the National Outline Plan for Building, Development and Conservation (Plan 35), which consolidates physical development into a concentrated set of urban centers while curbing suburbanization and urban sprawl and preserving a continuity of open spaces.

**April 2005:** Government approves plans for the 800-hectare Ayalon Park which will serve as a green lung for residents of the greater Tel Aviv metropolitan area, notwithstanding pressures for residential development in the area.

**September 2006:** National Planning and Building Board rejects a plan for a new communal village (Michal) in the Gilboa because of the area's high landscape value, presence of a legally protected asset (the Gilboa iris) and risks to the development potential of existing communities.

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