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AMMAN ON A MISSION



The Greater Amman Municipality announced last month the first phase of its Amman Interim Growth Strategy, which will guide the development of the city for decades to come. **Oula Farawati** looks at the strategy and gauges developers' views on this issue.

The Amman Interim Growth strategy was long called for by citizens and land developers alike, who said that haphazard planning and nepotism have marred the aesthetics of the capital and led to an overload on the infrastructure and resources. Amman Mayor Omar Maani said last month that the new strategy was developed after extensive analysis by international and local experts, including consultation with community stakeholders. The first stage of this strategy, to be fully announced before the end of this year, designated four areas for building high rises.

The areas chosen are Abdali, Abdoun, Jubeiha and the Airport Road. Mr. Maani said issues such as infrastructure, the preservation of heritage, maintaining green spaces and creating pedestrianized areas were major considerations behind the choice of locations.

"We now have a vision for our community. We see it as a win-win situation for our city and investors. We have clustered the towers into communities and selected areas that provide for balanced and planned urban expansion, intensification and regeneration. We were also careful to offer a variety of locations to satisfy market requirements," the mayor told an audience of land developers, major investors and media.

According to the mayor, the designation of the areas also took into consideration the capacity of Amman's roads and locating towers in a way that adds to the character of Amman, and does not disturb the city's unique urban fabric. Mr. Maani explained that high-rise towers will help achieve many community objectives and gave the example of locating these developments in clusters along future public transit corridors to enhance the viability of a modern rapid transit system.

Random planning

Amman has long suffered from unsystematic planning. For example, the Shmeisani neighborhood was long considered as the "villa area" of the capital. Recently, however, it has been transformed into the financial district of Amman. This unexpected development has led to continuous traffic congestion, angering residents, business owners and employees of the area.

"We need to develop Amman in a way that allows for urban development in pre-



designated areas that allow for the easy flow of traffic and satisfying the market needs," Mr. Maani added.

As set out in the interim plan, major parks and community facilities are planned to be integrated with tower developments, and subsequently, for every dunum designated for towers, another dunum will be developed as a park in the designated areas. General Manager of Union Land Development Company Ramzi Salfiti welcomed the plan as an "organizational map" for Amman. "The whole Amman planning was not organized and we suffered a lot from favoritism and unpleasant surprises when obtaining licenses," Mr. Salfiti told Jordan Business. "For example, if you buy an empty plot located next to an eight-storey building, you expect to be granted a similar license. But you soon discover that you can't, and that the eight-storey license was obtained by a wasta," he added. Mr. Salfiti added that this plan will also prevent constructing commercial buildings in the middle of a housing area, and vice versa.

Mixed reaction

In addition, developers hailed an announcement by the municipality that it was also working on a full-fledged development plan for the Airport Road. Land on both sides of the road has been sold to citizens and investors over the past two years. "This is very encouraging... This will help develop this area for tourism and organizational purposes," said Mr. Salfiti, whose company owns land on the Airport Road. Minem Al Nahar, a senior official at the Royal Village Project, also welcomed the plan. "[The municipality] went for certain criteria such as infrastructure, accessibility and green areas, and then chose the locations that meet these criteria, which I think is very transparent and professional. Amman needs this kind of 'right zoning' and we need to know that there will be no surprises in the future," he said.

"I believe this is a step in the right direction to implement strict zoning. And I am 100% with not assigning all of the Airport Road to become a high-rise area because we need to keep the flow of traffic along this road smooth as it is Ammanites' way to go back from the airport," he told Jordan Business.

However, some saw the new plan as being imposed on the Jordanian society. From an aesthetic viewpoint, Engineer Abdullah Ghosheh said the municipality only chose wadis for tower locations, which he said was not logical.

"Why did they only designate wadis for tower locations? I think hilltops and mountains also allow for the construction of high rises. High rises should not be hidden," he added.

Mr. Ghosheh, a member of Architectural Branch of the Engineers Association, also criticized the municipality for not engaging the public and the professional society in its evaluations. "These decisions affect our lives and investments and we should have a say in them," he told Jordan Business.

Sharing development proceeds

Meanwhile, Mayor Maani explained that tower developers will be expected to pay their "equitable share" of required infrastructure improvements to service these developments.

In addition, some of the financial windfall realized by land owners will revert back to the community in the form of a “purchase of development rights” policy, which means that land owners wishing to develop towers in the designated areas will have to “purchase” these development rights from the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM)). Revenues received by GAM will then be used for community development efforts such as preserving heritage areas and buildings, improving cultural facilities, creating parks and public meeting places, retrofitting public facilities for the disabled and improving the city’s overall infrastructure.

“It is not the intention of GAM to benefit specific landowners. Our citizens should share in this financial benefit in the form of improved public facilities or lower taxes,” Mr. Maani said.

The mayor also announced that GAM has established a new Special Areas and Projects Department to guide tower development. This department will have a division that is focused on investor and community relations to ensure that project approvals take into consideration a balance of business and community interests. The municipality is recruiting across the region and internationally to bring back some of the talent Jordan has lost in the field of planning, architecture, engineering and urban design.

Under Development

Tower developments will be permitted in Amman’s New Central Business District, which is the Abdali development site. It will consist of a mixed-use development, ranging from office, commercial, hotel and residential development including public parks and facilities such as a new municipal library. The mayor said that the municipality’s vision is for Abdali to become the center for finance and commerce in Amman.

The municipality also designated what it dubbed the Central Parkway, whereby a parkway development is proposed with four clusters of mid-rise developments nested in a park setting along the wadi corridor below the extension bridge, extending from the bridge south-easterly to where Princess Basma Road meets Prince Ali Bin-Al-Hussein Road. At the mid-point, a landmark development is proposed. This is an urban intensification area that takes into consideration the city skyline, view planes, and the opportunity to create an urban greenbelt. Traditional Amman stairs and walkways, with appropriate landscaping, will be integrated into the development linking it with adjacent neighborhoods. It’s also located along a major proposed transit corridor.

The third area will be called Amman Northern Gateway, which is located in Jubeiha along the Jordan Road, north of Al-Shaheed Ring Road and east of the Queen Rania Road that serves the University district and the Al-Hussein Youth City. The municipality envisions the Jordan Road, a new major expressway linking the central city with the North, and the area is already experiencing a considerable degree of new development.

“[This] area is located close to the existing Northern Bus Terminal, and is expected to be readily served by public transit in the near future. The area is set in gently rolling hills and the high density mixed-use development has been located in the lower areas of the topography,” the blueprint stated. The fourth area is called Amman Southern Gateway, which is adjacent to the Airport Road and framed by

Wadi Abdoun Corridor Road and Jabal Arafat Road. It is the southern gateway into Amman located at the Airport Road 'y' intersection where the traffic splits towards 7th and 8th circles. The southern boundary of the area, Jabal Arafat Road will become one of the major arteries to carry traffic into Amman and away from Zahran Street for destinations such as the city centre, Abdali, East and North East Amman. Four nodes of tower developments are proposed in the wadis of the area and located along proposed transit corridors that will link it to other parts of the city. The center of the area has been reserved for a major shopping street surrounded by low density developments: high density clusters are located on the periphery of the area.

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