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The King's Garden (Gan Hamelech, Al Bustan) – Development Plan

Tuesday, March 2, 2010, Jerusalem, Israel - The King's Garden area will be developed into a tourist and residential district. Commercial sections, restaurants, and art galleries will be built, turning it into a bustling tourist zone. For the first time, the local residents will have the legitimate right to live in this neighborhood.

The Mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, has introduced his new development plan for the King's Garden area, located south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

The proposal – soon to be brought before the local and regional planning committees for discussion – aims to create a mixed use of the area, making it attractive to both tourists and the local residents. The project will comprise several interlaced elements:

1. **Restoration of the garden:** The western part of the Gan Hamelech area will be restored to its historical condition as a site of international as well as national prominence. The Gihon Spring will once again flow along the Kidron Valley, the orchards will be replanted, and a blooming garden will be grown, which would be open to both visitors and the neighborhood residents.
2. **Development of commerce, restaurants and tourism:** In the eastern part of the neighborhood, about 3000 sq.m of land will be approved for the construction of commercial areas, restaurants, artists' workshops, souvenir and local art shops, all on the ground level.
3. **Housing units for the welfare of the district residents:** On the eastern side, above the commercial level, housing units will be built to satisfy the needs of the local residents.
4. **Infrastructure:** The area, having been designated in the past to be an open recreational space, has not been planned or developed. The Jerusalem Municipality intends to design urban infrastructure, including the upgrade of the road and sewage infrastructure and other local facilities.
5. **A public facility building:** According to the plan, large building for the welfare of the neighborhood residents will be constructed on a 2000 sq.m site designated to include public areas, schoolrooms, day care centers, kindergartens, workout gyms, infant welfare centers, etc. The center, in addition to other establishments promoted by the municipality for the welfare of the residents of the eastern part of the city, will provide suitable solutions for the neighborhood residents. Underground a parking lot will be built for about 140 vehicles.

This plan constitutes a precedent inasmuch as apart from enforcing the law upon illegally built houses, it also enables and helps residents to build new homes in accordance with the law.

This plan is considered a bold move due to the following reasons:

- According to the national law, the King's Garden is at present classified as an open recreational space. Some of the neighborhood houses are under continuous legal proceedings, including fines, demolition orders, etc.
- Throughout the years and especially after regulating the sewage infrastructure in 1992, extensive parts of the park have been destroyed, and dozens of structures have been erected without permits. Thus, within a short time another greenbelt has ceased to exist in the city.
- The area, which for centuries has been preserved as an open space, and until 1967 had included no more than four buildings, has turned into a slum, lacking infrastructure, public institutions, and devoid of any planning.
- The municipal plan for the King's Garden neighborhood intends to restore the area to its natural state, the way it used to be as an open space for the benefit of residents and tourists, while providing an appropriate solution to the needs of the inhabitants of the area and creating tourist and business opportunities for the entire district.
- The proposal considers the long lasting present situation whereby about 120 families inhabit the neighborhood under difficult housing conditions.
- The realization of this program is a particularly difficult process, in view of the fact that the land in this area is not regulated.
- The process requires shifting some buildings from the western side of the Kidron Valley to its eastern side, which involves special legal procedures.
- The process requires designing and judiciary creativity as well as the cooperation of numerous factors. The Jerusalem Municipality acts vis-à-vis all these factors, among which are the municipal legal department and the State Attorney, for the purpose of finding a legitimate solution suitable for the recent design and enforcement of the Jerusalem municipality.
- The process requires determination on the part of government factors and cooperation on the part of the local residents and their representatives. Whenever the residents cooperate, the municipality will be flexible, but when they attempt to undermine the plan, the municipality will remain firm in its implementation.
- In the course of last year, dozens of meetings and debates were held with the neighborhood residents and their representatives, with the intent of formulating a fair program which would consider their needs as well as the extensive public interest, and with the objective of establishing a fundamental trust in the intentions and the program of the municipality.