

Coalition for the Preservation of the Historic Basin

Background

The plan to build the cable car in the Old City was set into motion by a government decision in 2017 in honor of Jerusalem Day. The project is being advanced by the Jerusalem Development Authority. According to the promoters of the plan, the cable car is the most efficient, expedient and inexpensive solution for transporting masses to the Western Wall. They claim that it can be constructed within 15 months at a cost of approximately ILS 200 million.

The plan was approved on June 3, 2019, by the National Infrastructure Committee, from where it advanced to the stage of governmental approval. According to the plan, the cable car will travel between three stations: originating at the First Station in the Baka/Abu Tor neighborhood, continuing to Mt. Zion, and finally, ending at the yet-to-be-built Kedem Compound near Dung Gate. In addition, a depot is slated for construction in Abu Tor, near Ha-Mefaked Street.

The effect of the cable car on the surrounding area will be dramatic. It will deal a fateful blow to the ancient landscape of the city; tourist sites and merchants in the Old City will be negatively affected by the change in the course of tourist traffic to the city; it will impact the local residents of Wadi Hilweh/Silwan, Mt. Zion, Abu Tor and the German Colony neighborhoods, who will suffer from congestion caused by the hundreds and thousands of tourists descending from buses stopping on the narrow David Remez Street near the First Station.

The Coalition for the Preservation of the Historic Basin is comprised of public bodies and citizens who are cognizant of the unique historic, cultural and religious value of the Old City Historic Basin and the need to protect it from poorly conceived construction and development projects such as the cable car project.

Planning Professionals Overwhelmingly Oppose the Cable Car but their Voices have been Silenced

Despite the far-reaching effects of the plan, the government of Israel has chosen to circumvent the usual planning committees and opted to process the project in the National Infrastructure Committee (NIC). Planning professionals, for their part, seized the narrow window of opportunity given by the NIC to submit objections which were categorically rejected by the special researcher appointed by the committee. Among the professional organizations that submitted objections: The Israel Association of United Architects, The Council for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel, The Moreshet Derekh Tour Guides Union (MDTGU), 15 Minutes Public Transportation Alliance, Emek Shaveh, Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights, and the Arab Center for Alternative Planning (ACAP). In addition to the objections of these organizations, many professionals submitted individual objections.

Beyond these objections, a public statement against the plan was published by approximately 70 architects, archaeologists, historians and intellectuals, among them, four Israel Prize recipients, opposing the plan. Additionally, a letter was signed by 35 leading architects around the world, calling on the government of Israel to halt the plan, that, if carried out, would be destructive to the historic city.

Flaws in the Cable Car Plan

Violation of Landscaping and Architectural Values: The planned course to Mt. Zion will traverse the Ben Hinnom Valley, and continue along the southern wall of the Old City. Between the stations, 15 massive support columns, each 6-7 stories high, will be erected, with thick cables between them on which the cable car will travel, with dozens of cars in operation simultaneously; all this will be visible from afar. The damage to the view of the Old City walls and the Ben Hinnom Valley will be unprecedented.

Protection of Historical Character: In historic cities, it is accepted practice to preserve values of history landscape and heritage. In order to prevent damage to the historic character of a city, policies are designed to prevent the introduction of projects that are foreign to the unique urban fabric. The difficulty in handling the pressures created by the influx of tourists is a known phenomenon in many historic cities in the world, and is dealt with using sustainable tourism practices, not by crudely attempting to multiply numbers with no regards to capacity.

Alternatives: While the Jerusalem municipality and the Ministry of Tourism are advancing the cable car plan, the Ministry of Transportation is advancing two plans for this same exact area: a light rail and a train, both intended to pass underground.

Tourist-based or transportation based? Although the cable car is presented as the solution to the problem of access to the Western Wall and as a mass transportation system, the Ministry of Transportation (according to its official statements), does not view it as a transportation project, but rather as a tourism venture, and therefore, subsidies for travel in the cable car at the rate of public transportation fare, a decision that rests with the Transportation Ministry, is doubtful. On the other hand, whether the tourist project will provide a solution for tourists is also questionable, since most of Jerusalem's hotels are not concentrated near the First Station, and access to tourists will not be convenient and quick. Many tour guides claim they will not use the cable car since it requires separating groups and dividing them over a number of cars.

The cable car will not relieve traffic congestion: The cable car is not part of an overarching solution for traffic congestion in Jerusalem, and is likely to transfer load to the area of the First Station and the entrance to Baka, the German Colony and other neighborhoods. Even today, the area of the First Station is crowded, and the adjacent parking lot is intended for the many visitors to the First Station, not the Old City. The initiators of the project are proud of the interfaces between the cable car and the light rail (still under construction), but these have not yet been approved, and the date of implementation lies many years in the future.

Waste of public funds: The budgets approved to date for the cable car project total ILS 14 million for planning and ILS 200 million for implementation. It is clear to all that these are only preliminary sums, that will only grow. These sums of course do not include ongoing operation costs and the losses that will be incurred due to the fact that the cable car will not operate on Shabbat and holidays, and (if the promoters implement the fee they have quoted) the low cost of travel on public transportation. Today, when the state budgetary deficit hovers at billions of shekels, the cable car is a waste of public funds. If the government of Israel is interested in solving Jerusalem's public transportation problems, it would be preferable to invest these enormous sums in the improvement of public transportation in the city. Residents and visitors would benefit much more.

Damages to merchants in the Old City and the surrounding area: The commercial centers of Jaffa Gate, David Street in the Arab market, Mamilla and others, rely on the movement of tourists back and forth to the Old City. Most of the visitors enter the Old City through the Jaffa and Damascus Gates. Building the cable car in the southern part of the city will create an alternate tourist route and cause substantial economic damage to many merchants. It should be recalled that the entrance via Jaffa Gate leaves visitors with an understanding of the rich complexity of ancient (and present-day) Jerusalem in a single glance; on entering, one sees the Armenian and Jewish Quarters on the right, the Arab market and the Muslim Quarter straight ahead, and to the left, the Christian Quarter.

Conclusion

The cable car is an experiment in Jerusalem's Old City, the most important and sensitive site in the region. Although the project is being presented to the public as a solution to transportation problems and tourism needs, it does not provide a proper solution in either of these areas, and, moreover, will inflict a mortal wound on the historic character of the Old City and its environs, destroying its famed beauty which draws visitors from around the world.

We call for the annulment of the plan, and in its stead, to advance a new plan to improve accessibility of the Old City's Historic Basin. The plan should be led by the Ministry of Transportation together with professionals from a variety of areas, in order to preserve Jerusalem's unique character and beauty.