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Beirut municipality halts plans to build parking lots under gardens

Public outcry puts project on hold

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BEIRUT: Beirut Municipality has put on indefinite hold a controversial plan to build parking lots under Beirut's only two public gardens after a coalition of local residents rallied opposition to the project. Government officials had been "exploring the idea" of building large parking lots under the Sanayeh and Sioufi gardens to accommodate the city's growing population, Mayor Abed al-Monim Ariss told The Daily Star on Monday. "What the municipality thought of is nothing new and has been done all over the world," Ariss said, citing similar projects in Cairo, London, Monte Carlo and Paris.

The project has stalled in its preliminary stages after local residents and Lebanese as far away as the United Kingdom condemned what they saw as the last nails in the coffin for Beirut's green spaces.

"We understand their concerns," Mayor Ariss said. "We will never take any action that does not meet the wishes of the people." He nevertheless pointed to a desperate and growing need for parking facilities in Beirut, which hosts around 800,000 cars every day. "I hope people realize that if we [municipality] think of something, we think about it for the benefit of the community," he said. If the project does ever come to fruition, the entrances and exits to the parking lots will be situated on surrounding streets and not affect either of the gardens' vegetation, he added.

Although the project has been put on hold, the anger it has aroused is continuing to make ripples, with many saying the government has destroyed Lebanon's once-cherished reputation as a haven of lush greenery in the otherwise arid Middle East.

"If these spaces go, the [leafy campus of] The American University of Beirut will be the only one left," said Randa Zaiter, a resident of Sanayeh who helped mobilize opposition to the plan. She pointed not only to the historical importance of the park, which features an Ottoman fountain, but also to the site's humanitarian role. During the July 2006 conflict with Israel, Sanayeh was transformed into a massive camp for displaced Lebanese.

Roula Ajouz, who sits on the public gardens committee at the Beirut Municipality said that the parking lot project had been grossly misinterpreted by the community. "The decision was to see how to create a parking lot for the area without harming the gardens or cutting the trees," many of which are hundreds of years old.

"I assure you on behalf of most of the members of the city council that we would never accept to harm the gardens," said Ajouz, pointing to a "desperate need" for more green spaces in the capital.

"I think it's about time that us Lebanese start having a say in the policies that influence the formation of our public space ... Every Lebanese has 0.1 square meters of green space ... while in other countries like England an individual has a right to 25 square meters," said blogger Lama Bizri.

But according to Fadi Shaaya, an architect and urban planner writing a book about public space in Beirut, local residents were denied information about the project when they met with municipality officials. "The residents asked to see plans for the project but the municipality refused," he said, lamenting the lack of transparency. "If there are plans, why can't we see them?"