

ELECTION ISSUES – POLITICIANS MEET VOTERS



Tel Aviv residents recently gathered in Jaffa to hear mayoral candidates and city representatives lay out their view for the future, but were left with the same feeling of déjà vu

• By Jesse Fox
Photos by Daniel Cherrin

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel's (SPNI) Tel Aviv Center for Environmental Action recently held its fourth regional city conference, entitled "Bocharim Darom" (Choosing or Voting South).

While previous conferences featured discussions of environmental and social problems in the central, northern and eastern quarters of the city, this time around, Jaffa and south Tel Aviv were on the evening's agenda. The conference, which took place on Jerusalem Boulevard in the center of Jaffa, brought together residents, neighborhood activists and city politicians for a discussion of current problems and future planning options in the area ahead of municipal elections on November 11.

Omer Cohen, former urban planner for SPNI Tel Aviv, told *Metro*: "South Tel Aviv and Jaffa are currently the 'backyard' of the city. The purpose of the conference was to put the area's environmental problems on the agenda, and ask members of the city council, present and future, how they plan to deal with them."

The first half of the evening was devoted to exploring the expectations of Jaffa and south Tel

Aviv's residents regarding development of their neighborhoods. Presentations were given and a long list of problems recounted, including lack of parks, air pollution and traffic, and insufficient investment in basic infrastructure. Many expressed the desire to see the unique character of Jaffa and south Tel Aviv preserved, despite the extensive development plans for the area. Some speakers, especially those from Jaffa, mentioned a feeling of not really being part of Tel Aviv.

Amir Badran of Yaffa, a Jewish-Arab political party representing Jaffa residents, told the gathering that Jaffa's problems were simply not on the agenda of the current city council. He emphasized housing problems, saying, "A city that respects itself and its residents cannot allow a 'transfer' of its citizens, especially when they are a national minority. Today, the city says finding solutions to housing problems is not its responsibility. The first thing we will do when we are elected is to freeze the 500 standing home eviction and demolition orders in Jaffa."

Others criticized the city's approach to the development of southern neighborhoods, which, they said, put the real estate developers' interests ahead of residents' needs. "The south [of the city] is being filled with building plans," said Florentine neighborhood activist and new mother Liyat Esakov, with her newborn baby slung around her neck, "but the people living here are

being pushed aside, and the problems in our neighborhoods are not being solved. Building new apartments is not enough – the south needs new public spaces and public institutions, like schools and baby clinics. In Florentine, there is an approved strategic master plan for the neighborhood dating back to 2000, but the city is acting contrary to it."

Deputy Mayor Doron Sapir, Chairman of Tel Aviv's Local Planning and Construction Committee (through which all building plans in the city must pass on their way to final approval), tried to put a more positive spin on the current

(From left to right) DEPUTY MAYOR Doron Sapir, Chairman of Tel Aviv's Local Planning and Construction Committee, had to speak over heavy heckling from the audience. 'STOP WASTING your time! We need to get people to vote!' yelled Pe'er Visner of the Green Party, but he was verbally assaulted by a female resident for leaving the event after his brief speech. MEITAL LEHAVI, head of the Meretz Party in Tel Aviv, proposed that the city recognize the rights of groups who have lived in Tel Aviv for decades, instead of defining them as 'squatters.'



'BUILDING NEW apartments is not enough – the south needs new public spaces and public institutions, like schools and baby clinics,' says Florentine neighborhood activist and new mother Liyat Esakov.

administration's handling of the south of the city. He recounted a long list of recent municipal initiatives in Jaffa, including the construction of a new academic college, an NIS 6 million investment in infrastructure and other hefty investments in schools and new parks. He went on to laud the benefits of tall apartment towers, suggesting that new skyscrapers could contribute greatly to the revitalization of the city's south.

Speaking over aggressive heckling from the audience, Sapir described the city's approach in planning the area. "I see the south of the city as [its] greatest development potential," he said. "The north of the city will soon be fully built, and building tall buildings is problematic in the center. The south has the greatest potential for new housing and a new central business district."

The notion that Jaffa and south Tel Aviv represent the city's future development reserves was a recurring theme throughout the evening, an idea shared by residents, activists and decision-makers alike. In its neglected state, Jaffa and the city's southern neighborhoods are already absorbing masses of people who have been priced out of the city center, and future development plans were seen both as a threat and an opportunity for the area.

MK Dov Henin (Hadash), a candidate for mayor on behalf of a new party called A City for All, was critical of the status quo: "Jaffa is and isn't part of Tel Aviv," he said. "It's the city's backyard in every sense: housing, parks, environmental quality and so on. The reality in the next few years, if the city doesn't step in, will be very difficult."

Henin proposed developing infrastructure and green spaces, giving decision-making power to the com-

the city, instead of 'importing' new residents. "We need to make a multi-year plan for the physical and social



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munity and citizens' organizations and making development work for the current residents of the south of

rehabilitation of Jaffa. Education is key in [both] the Arab and Jewish sectors. Students from the south

should not have to travel to the center of the city for schooling," he said.

A similar view was expressed by Meital Lehavi, head of the Meretz Party in Tel Aviv. Lehavi, a city council member and long-time opponent of the municipality's development policies, addressed several issues, including the ongoing struggle to provide open spaces in Florentine, air pollution from the new central bus station and new construction in southern neighborhoods. Lehavi proposed that the city recognize the rights of groups who have lived in the city for decades, instead of defining them as "squatters" – a common status in Jaffa and other southern neighborhoods. She pointed out that according to existing zoning, all of the Carmel Market's vendors could be deemed "squatters."

Some speakers preferred a more provocative approach. Pe'er Visner of the Green Party began his address by yelling at the crowd, "Stop wasting your time! We need to get people to vote! The only way to bring about a revolution is to get people out to vote!" Visner expressed his support for building "anchors" in the south of the city, such as new colleges.

After a brief speech, Visner excused himself from the gathering, explaining that he had to attend another event, and invited the audience to visit his Web site. As he walked out, one woman yelled, "And he wants to be mayor! It's all a bluff, what are they talking about? Five years they sit on their chairs, and they don't do anything! The big boys always sit up there and talk, and we sit quietly. It's time for us to speak!"

As the night progressed, the audience became increasingly impatient with their elected leaders. After the politicians had all finished speaking (and after several of them had already left), David, a resident of Kfar Shalem, took the microphone.

"Every five years they come and sell us stories," he said. "We sit and listen like idiots. Why don't we unite? Only that way will we be able to influence the mayor. I wish everyone here success, but don't forget one thing: We gave you the power to sit there."

