



# Seeing is believing

*The recent release of documents detailing municipal policy and decision-making is a radical and welcome step toward transparency regarding the workings of Tel Aviv's local government*

• By JESSE FOX

**T**he Tel Aviv Municipality has agreed to release key documents containing details on municipal policy and decision-making. The move came in response to growing public pressure and charges of a lack of transparency at the highest municipal levels.

The newly released documents contain information about the workings of several dozen municipal committees, including one which has been described as the city's supreme decision-making body, as well as the particulars of the city's yearly budget.

A recent *Metro* article exposed claims that a secretive and little-known institution at the municipality has effectively supplanted the city council as the body that runs the city. According to a number of sources, the institution, known as the "Management Committee" (*va'adat hanhala*), operates behind closed doors and with a total lack of transparency.

The Management Committee is the most powerful of several dozen committees. Composed mainly of city council members, these committees are charged with hammering out policy on issues such as the city's school system, environmental protection and transportation.

Like the Management Committee, most committees do not publish records of their discussions, making it difficult for the public and nongovernmental organizations to keep track of their work.

Adding to the controversy, motions raised in the city council for debate are almost always transferred to the various committees for discussion, where their fate is often unclear.

Critics charge that most of the committees are essentially meaningless, many of them meeting only rarely, while the real decision-making power rests with the Management Committee.

In response to the report, the Tel Aviv Municipality issued a surprising statement claiming that "any citizen

may review the minutes of [Management Committee] meetings." The statement added that "Management Committee meetings do not take place in the dark."

That statement took Tamar Neugarten of Council Watch by surprise. A project of the Tel Aviv Green Forum (under the auspices of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel), Council Watch (*mishmar hamoetza*) monitors environmental decision-making on the city council. In recent months it has been involved in a public campaign to open up municipal committees, including the Management Committee, to public scrutiny.

ACCORDING TO Neugarten, transcripts of Management Committee meetings had never before been presented as available to the public. "We weren't sure if they were serious or not," she told *Metro* recently.

Eager to hold the municipality to its word, Council Watch quickly submitted a formal request to view the transcripts of the Management Committee's meetings. At the same time, a letter was sent to City Council Chairwoman Yael Dayan requesting that transcripts of all committee discussions be posted on the municipality's Web site. The letter noted that this was already standard practice in other cities, including Jerusalem and Modi'in.

Council Watch eventually – two months later – gained access to the Management Committee transcripts, following what Neugarten describes as an exhausting bureaucratic runaround. It was apparently the first time a public interest group had been allowed to analyze the documents, which were sitting in storage in the municipal archive.

Around the same time, an amendment to the city council's procedural guidelines was brought for a vote on the city council. Proposed by council members Yoav Goldring and Tamar Zandberg, the amendment stated that transcripts of all municipal committee discussions would be made "available to the public." Previously, the guidelines had stated that they would be available only to city council members.

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The amendment passed unanimously, without debate. During the same meeting, however, the mayor made it clear that the public would still not be allowed to attend committee meetings.

For the members of Council Watch, it was a radical and welcome step toward transparency.

In response to an inquiry by *Metro*, the municipality pointed out that minutes from city council meetings, as well as the Planning and Construction Committee and Licensing Committee, are already published on the municipality's Web site. Regarding the transcripts of the Budget Committee and Management Committee discussions, the city promised that they would be posted online "soon."

In the meantime, Council Watch has already begun examining the newly obtained Management Committee documents and is working on compiling summaries of the committee's recent meetings and decisions, which will be published on its Web site.

An initial analysis, said Neugarten, confirmed some of Council Watch's suspicions.

"We found that there is a sizable backlog of subjects up for discussion, and that they are discussing issues that are supposed to be dealt with by other committees," she said.

AT THE same time, she added, the transcripts show Management Committee meetings to be serious and professional, with detailed presentations made by officials and outside experts, something which she said does not necessarily happen in city council meetings.

"These are serious and important discussions," Neugarten concludes, "and I don't think they need to hide them from the public."

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In late 2009, for the first time ever, a copy of the NIS 4.24 billion municipal budget was published online before coming up for discussion by the city council. However, certain members of the city council protested that the document was published in a closed format (the municipality chose to publish the budget in several hundred pages of pdf files) that did not allow for easy, computerized analysis. Such analysis was necessary, they argued, in order to expose distortions in the city's budget allocations – for example, alleged discrimination in education funding – before the city council vote.

City officials, however, refused to accede to the request, arguing that the municipality did not have the technical capacity to export the budget file in an open format. Not everyone was convinced, and in early 2010 Ir Lekulanu (City for Us All), an opposition movement on the city council, and the Movement for Freedom of Information, a nongovernmental organization, took the municipality to court.

That strategy paid off. In early July, one day before the Tel Aviv District Court was scheduled to discuss the case, the city suddenly announced that it had solved the technical problem and that it would release next year's budget in an open format, which would be available to the public on the municipality's Web site.

The peculiar timing of the announcement led Ir Lekulanu activists to theorize that the municipality had realized it was headed for an embarrassing defeat in court.

The municipality disputed this, saying in a statement: "The request to receive the budget file, specifically in an Excel file, was not possible technologically, and there was no legal obligation [to do so], yet despite this the mayor announced that the file would be released when that became possible. And indeed, when it became possible, the municipality consented to do so."