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May 27th, 2020

Dr. Wael Al Sheikh

General Director of Ramallah and El Bireh Health Directorate

Ministry of Health

Dear Dr. Al Sheikh,

I am writing on behalf of Birzeit in the diaspora to address the Hot Blend Asphalt Plant being built in our beloved hometown, Birzeit. We are concerned that this project threatens the health and safety of a large segment of citizens in Birzeit and its vicinity. We feel strongly that this kind of project undermines the health, beauty, and long-term economic stability of Birzeit and the surrounding areas. We also believe that the health impact on residents of the area and workers in the plant will create an undue financial burden on individuals and the Ministry of Health through the negative health outcomes associated with working in and living near a hot mix asphalt plant.

Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the other existential issues that currently face the Palestinian people, we know that you are tirelessly working for the betterment of our people. We believe that you will continue to do what it takes to guide our people to a healthy and safe future. We thank you for taking a proactive stance by issuing a recommendation to stop the construction of the plant but the potential for long term and lasting hazards propel us to urgently request that you reconsider your granting of the licenses for the asphalt plant and ask that the construction of the facility be halted and the licenses for the plant be revoked.

There have been many scientific studies conducted on the hazards of asphalt plants around the world, which clearly highlight the havoc they wreak on people and local environments. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration in the United States as well as the Environmental Protection Agency report that emissions of toxic gases into the atmosphere from asphalt plants can be directly inhaled and indirectly deposited through rain and air/water gas exchanges. When people inhale or ingest these toxic chemicals it increases the risk for cancer, central nervous system problems, liver damage, headaches, skin rashes, asthma, fatigue, reduced appetite, throat and eye irritation and coughing. Animal studies indicate that ingestion of toxins from asphalt plants can also cause reproduction problems, birth defects, and may impact the immune system. These conditions require intensive and long-term health care interventions which are costly to both the individual and society. These conditions also greatly reduce quality of life and may result in premature death. In addition, Birzeit University just today released a study noting that the asphalt plant will be harmful to the local population and agriculture.

Furthermore, while we recognize the potential positive economic impact of the plant the few jobs that this type of plant might create in our area do not justify the potential health costs to our people. The workers themselves are the first victims of the health hazards listed

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above. This is a burden that the people, local government agencies, and the Ministry of Health will carry, but that the plant itself will not.

The creation of an asphalt plant in Birzeit will also negatively impact the local environment by polluting air and water through acidification, creating a foul odor that permeates local towns and villages, and reducing the health of local flora and fauna that make Birzeit such a beautiful place to live and visit. Presence of this odor could reduce the number of students willing to enroll at Birzeit University and the number of individuals who come to tour Birzeit for the museums and historical societies. All of these would have a negative impact on Birzeit's current economic stability as well as surrounding areas, particularly as students travel to Ramallah to shop for necessities, and tourists may travel through Ramallah to come to places like Birzeit and Jifna.

As you can see, the negative impact of the asphalt plant on the local economy and the health of the town far outweighs the meager benefits. Birzeit has long been a bastion of higher education and technology in the West Bank. The opportunity to attract more university students and the promotion of advanced and clean technology businesses would be a more economically sustainable way to create job opportunities that respect human health and the local environment. For example, we could promote computer coding courses in high schools, and create adult learning courses in software design that will attract larger technology companies who are seeking individuals with such skills.

For the above reasons, and based off of the Birzeit University study citing the harmful effects of the asphalt plant, we again ask that construction of the plant is permanently halted and the licenses for the plant be revoked. We appreciate all that you do for our beloved country, Palestine, and we look forward to seeing a positive closure to this issue. We truly hope that with your assistance, we can start focusing on building a bright future for both of our towns, and our country as a whole.

Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this matter.

Most respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Maryland Ubaid".

Maryland Ubaid, Esq.  
National President  
Birzeit Society