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May 28th, 2020

Mrs. Rula Maa'yaa

Minister of Tourism and Antiquities

State of Palestine

Dear Mrs. Maa'yaa,

I am writing on behalf of Birzeitis 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, touristic appeal, and long-term economic stability of Birzeit.

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 the construction of the facility be halted and the licenses for the plant be revoked. We also ask that the zoning of the area be changed from industrial to a zoning more in line with the close proximity to residential areas.

An environmental impact study just published by Birzeit University agrees with the 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 reports 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, the Birzeit University study notes that the asphalt plant will be harmful to the local population and agriculture.

Furthermore, the few jobs that this type of plant might create in the local area do not justify the potential health costs to our people. The workers themselves are the first victims of the health hazards listed above. In addition, this will place a financial burden on the Ministry of Health considering a proportion of health expenses are covered by the Ministry of Health and not the patients themselves. This is a burden that the people, local government agencies, and the Ministry of Health will carry, but that the plant itself will not.

Mrs. Rula Maa'yaa  
May 28, 2020  
Page 2

The creation of an asphalt plant in Birzeit will also negatively impact the local environment by polluting air and water, 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, historical societies, and many cultural events, including the Rozana Festival. All of these would have a negative impact on Birzeit's current economic stability, culture, and character of the town, as well as surrounding areas.

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 companies would be a more economically sustainable way to create job opportunities that respect human health and the local environment.

For the above reasons, and based off of the Birzeit University study citing harmful effects of the asphalt plant, we again ask that the construction of the plant is halted and the licenses for the plant be revoked. We also ask that the zoning of the region be changed from industrial to a zoning more in line with the close proximity to residential areas. 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 Birzeit and the country.

Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this matter.

Most respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maryland Ubaid". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Maryland Ubaid, Esq.  
National President  
Birzeit Society