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May 17th, 2020

Dr. Mai Kaileh
Minister of Health
State of Palestine

Dear Dr. Kaileh,

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, and long-term economic stability of Birzeit. The health impact of the plant will bring a financial burden to individuals and the Health Ministry as the inhalation of fumes by citizens and workers has been linked to deleterious health outcomes. 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. The timing of dealing with this Hot Blend Asphalt Plant issue is unfortunate, but the potential for long term and lasting hazards propel us to urgently request that the construction of the facility be halted, the licenses for the plant be revoked, and the zoning be changed from industrial to a zoning that matches the residential nature of the area.

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 and 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.

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 above.

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This is a burden that the people, the Ministry of Health, and that local government agencies 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, 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 cultural events. All of these would have a negative impact on Birzeit's current economic stability 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 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, we again ask that the construction of the facility be halted, the licenses for the plant be revoked, and the zoning be changed from industrial to a zoning that matches the residential nature of the area. 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 Birzeit and the country.

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