



Photo by: Planned science park in Beersheba.

Blueprint for Beersheba

By YOCHAVED MIRIAM RUSSO
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Energetic young Mayor Rubik Danilovich has taken the bold step of publishing a blueprint complete with timelines for 35 major projects.

It's breakthrough time for Beersheba. Long regarded as little more than a dilapidated, dusty desert town, today Beersheba, the "Capital of the Negev," finds itself undergoing a complete head-to-toe makeover. According to the Beersheba 2020 blueprint recently published by the city's aggressive young mayor, Rubik Danilovich, Beersheba is about to burst onto the international scene as a thriving urban desert oasis where quality of life reigns supreme.

So confident is Danilovich of his city's metamorphosis that he's put his own credibility on the line. A few weeks ago, Danilovich sent each household in Beersheba a colorful 32-page 2020 brochure setting forth some 35 projects, facilities and civic improvements he intends to build or implement – including a timeline specifying when each project will be completed.

"No other elected official in Israel has ever done anything like this," Danilovich says. No doubt he's right about that: Most politicians tend to avoid committing themselves to anything specific, let alone a host of major projects with "due dates" attached.

Danilovich doesn't see it like that. "I'm not a politician," he says. "A mayor's job is to lead – not to be led. Publishing the 2020 brochure, our 10-year plan, is all about responsibility and transparency.

“I ran for office saying I wanted to turn this city completely around, fill in the gap of 30-35 years during which there wasn’t much invested in Beersheba. Now people have expectations – as do I. But we don’t have billions of shekels to accomplish everything all at once.

“My objective in publishing the brochure – in pinning a date on which each project will be accomplished – was to let everyone know what they can expect. We all have pet projects, specific civic improvements we’d like done first. Some we can do now, some will come later.

The 2020 brochure lets everyone know what our priorities are, which projects we’re doing right now, and which will have to wait. The citizens of Beersheba deserve that kind of accountability.”

In plotting a 10-year timeline, Danilovich, now in the second year of his five-year term, sets forth plans that exceed his own term of office. “That’s taking responsibility,” he says.

“This is the first time civic officials here have done any long-term planning at all. I believe it’s my obligation not only to look at my first five years in office but to go beyond, into the future. Even if I’m not elected again, the city will still have a path to follow, a clear, ordered set of priorities.

“The only way you can move ahead effectively is to know what your obligations are, and when they will occur. We projected Beersheba out a full 10 years. That’s just good planning.”

Providing a timeline was the first objective, and the second was to drum up enthusiasm and commentary.

“I want the people of Beersheba to be my partners in this,” Danilovich says. “What we set out to do was establish the three main objectives for renewal: designing the image of the city for the future; branding the city with a common theme that will be echoed again and again in each new project; and providing a strategic plan for development.

“This isn’t something my staff and I did by ourselves – we had input from

professionals, experts and opinion makers of all kinds. Now that the brochure is out, we're hoping for public involvement, too. The changes coming about for the city of Beersheba represent an unprecedented investment in everything from transportation to infrastructure, to attracting industry and tourists, to improving culture and the quality of life for everyone. We need to work together."

The first project set forth in the brochure seems destined to knock just about everybody's socks off. In landlocked Beersheba, an artist's drawing depicts a lovely lake surrounded by trees.

A lake? Boats, in Beersheba? Indeed. One of the biggest projects on the drawing board is Park Nahal Beersheba, which involves the revitalization and recharging of the Beersheba River, which up until a year ago looked more like a Superfund site than the watery paradise shown.

Specifically, the new River Park will encompass 5200 dunams (5.2 sq.km) including a 100-dunam lake, surrounded by any number of leisure and recreational sites including restaurants, cafes, galleries and boat rentals. Then there's the spectacular futuristic lake-side amphitheater with seating for 12,000 – the largest in Israel – which will be further enhanced with recreation and sports areas, playgrounds and more.

Bikers and walkers fare well: They can choose the path around the lake, or instead make their way around the 250-dunam Central Promenade, which is three kilometers long – just about right for an hour-long walk.

The Promenade and Montreal Bell Park – a restful 40 dunams of eucalyptus, plants and picnic areas – are both complete and already in use.

For visitors who come into Beersheba on the train, an astonishing new sight greets them from the train windows. A considerable distance outside the city proper, part of the 400 dunams of additional walkways, bike paths and inviting little rest areas are also complete, with trees planted and vegetation growing.

Still to come is the completion of the historic Beit Eshel Park, which will serve as the official entrance to River Park. A courtyard with historic remnants of the

settlement that once stood here is done. Now a park is being built around the courtyard, recounting the story of the farm this once was, as well as the importance of the site during the 1948 War of Independence.

Also undergoing restoration is the Ottoman Bridge – one of the city’s most recognizable icons – and opening it to walkers and bikers. Ottoman Bridge will connect the Beduin Market in the north to River Park’s Central Promenade in the south.

“All of this is already funded,” Danilovich says. “We received NIS 150 million from the government, plus additional funds from the JNF, the IDB Group and from a number of private donors as well.”

Other significant elements within the River Park include Pipe Bridge, a fanciful collection of Mekorot water pipes that looks something like a Star Wars artifact, as well as a huge Sportek complex.

All these water-themed projects made several Beershevites ask, “Where’s all the water coming from? I thought we were in the midst of a serious water shortage!”

That’s another project, the mayor responds – also near completion and ready to begin functioning soon: the Beersheba Municipal Water Purification Plant.

Several years ago, the city began the construction of the plant to recycle collected waste and runoff water. All the water for all these projects, all around the city, will be recycled water, reclaimed instead of wasted. The technology to purify waste water to the levels required to meet drinking water standards is still too expensive to be feasible, experts say, but the water quality is fine for fountains, lakes and ornamental waterfalls.

“We won’t be wasting water anymore,” the mayor says. “We’ll be reusing it.”

Moving along, the brochure details no fewer than four new shopping malls. The first, Kenyon Beersheba, billed as the only completely ecologically planned mall in Israel – not to mention the biggest – is timelined for opening in 2012. Visitors to the 115,000-square-meter enclosed mall will be greeted by three waterfalls, augmented by pools for collecting rain water and air conditioner condensation,

channeling it for irrigation reuse.

According to developer Eli Lahav, there will also be an 8,000-meter green park with bike lanes beside the mall, extensive use of natural lighting throughout, and solar panels on the roof. Community rooms for classes, youth and IDF gatherings and a club for senior citizens are also part of the plan.

A second mall, Seventh Avenue, scheduled for opening later this year, will be located near the existing BIG and One Plaza shopping areas. An artist's drawing shows tree-shaded open areas surrounded by shops, cafes and rest and recreational areas.

The third mall – a Farmers Market – slated for opening in 2012, will be integrated with the River Park project. Based on a European model, this will be the first of its kind in Israel. Some 400 spaces for fruit, vegetable and food service vendors will be available. An artist's drawing shows an interesting enclosed circular building surrounded by parks and greenery.

The next project is sure to delight everyone who's ever ridden a bus into – or out of – Beersheba. Finally, a new enclosed Central Bus Station – and such a bus station! The glitzy glass-enclosed complex is part of a joint effort by the Ministry of Transportation and the city, and will include enclosed shops and cafes in addition to convenient access to arriving and departing buses. Construction is due to start this year.

The key to these projects, Danilovich emphasizes, is that they're all designed to reflect the same vision, a uniform common theme that will gradually be integrated into the city of Beersheba as a whole.

“The first thing on my agenda when I came to office was to preserve Beersheba's unique history,” Danilovich says. “We must remember our past – if we don't, we'll have no future.

“One thing Beersheba never capitalized on is our unique relationship with the biblical Abraham, a figure central to three different faiths. One of the first projects I personally began working on was to create the Avraham Avinu center, turning

the current small Abraham's Well center into an international-quality tourist attraction designed to appeal to visitors from around the world.

"This project is already funded – we had an initial donation of NIS 12 million to start, with another NIS 6 million from a donor in Phoenix who has, unfortunately, passed away. Another NIS 4 million came from Mifal Hapayis and NIS 2 million from the Ministry of Tourism.

"The Avraham Avinu center will be built on several levels and will include sensitive and quality presentations about our forefather calculated to inspire people from all three religious traditions. Construction is starting now, and the center is scheduled to open in 2012."

Sports fans will find much to love about the new Beersheba. North of the city, pegged to be ready in 2013, will be the new Sports Complex, with a 16,000-seat soccer stadium, in addition to an enclosed 3,000-seat multipurpose sports hall which can be used for everything from basketball, handball and volleyball to gymnastics and even artistic performances or music.

The idea for the Sports Complex – like several others – isn't new, the mayor says.

"Some have been discussed for years, others even started. But in the last several years, with the economic turndown and other existential challenges Beersheba faced, the projects weren't moving along as quickly as they should. So what I did was pour resources into these existing projects and pin a completion date on them. We're indebted not only to previous city officials and their staffs who worked intensively on many of these projects but also to donors who have been generous to Beersheba over the years. Now when we complete these projects we hope to justify their confidence in us."

There's still more sporting news: A new matnas or community center in the Ramot neighborhood is scheduled to open in 2012. It will include both a library and a sports facility. Then too, a Park Extreme will open in 2012 in the western part of the city near the Country Club. For lovers of extreme sports of all kinds – including bikers and skateboarders – having their own space will be a boon. This area will be fully handicap-accessible and outfitted with many elements designed to appeal to

the special-needs population.

Already sprouting up all over the city are the colorful outdoor public fitness parks filled with exercise equipment of all kinds. All these mini parks are accessible by bike and walking paths, and each is filled with equipment suited to all ages and levels of fitness, from kids to seniors.

And that's still not all: A "Katregel" – similar to little league soccer – facility will open, complete with fields, locker rooms, bleachers and a cafeteria, aimed at encouraging pickup games as well as scheduled events.

Just when you think you've heard it all, a beach sports center is scheduled to open in 2012, also in the western part of the city. The Beach Sport Center will let Beershevites hone their beach volleyball and beach soccer skills.

This isn't the first time Beersheba has waded into beach activities. Last summer, the Keren Hayesod Switzerland Youth Center – located in the very center of the Old City – hosted a fabulously successful beach party right on their front plaza.

"One really hot day last summer, we hauled in truckloads of sand. We had volleyball games, synthetic grass, a swimming pool and a DJ. Everyone was dancing," laughs director Ya'ir Naggid. "We even made Channel 2 news – 'Do you believe it?' they said. 'They're having a beach party in Beersheba!'"

The Youth Center is another of Danilovich's pet projects, initiated when he was deputy mayor.

"When Rubik was deputy, he came around to several of us and asked, 'What do you need in this city?'" Naggid recalls. "I was a radio broadcaster then, and I knew one of the things young people needed was a place to rehearse. We didn't have a recording studio. There was no open theater in Beersheba, no TV studio. The kids told me that if they weren't already famous, there was no place for them to perform. So I wrote it all down and gave it to Rubik.

"I can't promise anything,' he told me, but he took it all and gave it to the city architect. 'I'm just like any Beershevite,' Rubik told the architect. 'I don't have any

money. But this is what I want you to plan. If we get our donation, you'll get paid for doing the planning.'

"The architect agreed, put together a portfolio project, and Rubik started looking for donors. The Swiss loved it and, working together with Keren Hayesod, we got our Youth Center."

Today the Youth Center is a focal point in Danilovich's plan for recreating Beersheba's Old City. The plan – which involves many different projects – is to make the Old City Beersheba's center for culture, tourism and community activities of all kinds.

"We're pouring tens of millions of shekels into the Old City," Danilovich says. "We're upgrading the infrastructure throughout, rebuilding streets and walkways, redesigning traffic patterns to make it easier to get around. We're using tax breaks and other incentives to lure cultural, recreational and other kinds of small business to locate there. We plan to fill it with galleries and cafes, small shops and shady restful places to walk, eat, browse, socialize and enjoy the best Beersheba has to offer.

"The Old City will be the essence of Beersheba's quality of life, style and culture."

The Old City's newest success story is the renovated Ottoman-era building at the corner of Negba and Hahagana. Not long ago, the enormous building was a crumbling eyesore – vacant, broken windows, gaping doors, crumbling stonework – but in late April, the beautifully restored three-story building celebrated its opening as the headquarters of the Or Movement, where it will function as the "Gateway to the Negev."

With an expected 250,000 visitors a year, the Gateway will promote the development of the Negev by playing host to anyone – investors, donors, tourists, potential residents or new olim – who shares their vision for the Negev. As the Negev's official host, the Or Movement will offer presentations, attractions, information and a visitor center, complete with restaurant."

The Gateway bears another distinction: It was completed far ahead of schedule. The 2020 brochure pegs its completion date at 2012, but the public Grand Opening

is only a few months away.

Nearby, the first stirrings of “Museum Row” also appear. With four individual museums within close proximity to each other, the “2020” plan is to link them together with special walkways and street furniture. One – the historic Ottoman Mosque, built some 100 years ago during the reign of the Ottoman Empire – had, up to 1991, been used as an archeological museum. Declared structurally unsound, it was closed and then legal disputes gobbled up the years.

Today the full restoration is nearly complete. The mosque will reopen as the Museum of Archeology later this year.

Another nearby Ottoman structure, known locally as the Sheikh’s School, is midway though a major reconstruction and addition which will ultimately turn it into a Science Park by 2012. Funded by Keren Rashi, the restored Turkish building, plus a new above-ground building in addition to extensive underground construction, will serve as a hands-on science center where kids can experiment and learn in conjunction with the nearby Ilan Ramon Physics and Astronomy Center. Because much of the construction will be underground, the surface area will provide another park and green-space recreation.

Third on “Museum Row” is the massive transformation of the old Turkish Train Station into a Railroad Museum and heritage center, pegged for completion in 2013.

“The train station demonstrates the centrality of Beersheba both now and in ancient times,” Danilovich says. “It’s another part of the city’s iconic riches.”

Already operational is the Negev Museum of Art, one of the Old City’s most beautiful buildings. “Built in 1906, this was the original Governor’s Residence during the Ottoman era,” says museum director Noga Raved. “Since 2004, we’ve been offering tours of the historic building itself in addition to our mission as a fine arts museum, with rotating art collections that change every few months.”

Starting on May 17, the popular summertime “Monday at the Museum” music series begins its fourth annual season. Popular musical artists appear and perform outdoors, while up to 1,000 people enjoy themselves while lounging on

the grassy lawn. The concerts are a blend of music with an informal interview, orchestrated by Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Hebrew literature Professor Nissim Calderon, who created the program.

“It’s a chance for the citizens of Beersheba to mix with BGU students, enjoy the music and have a chance to carry on an informal conversation with the artists,” Raved says. “While they’re here for the music, many people come inside the museum and enjoy the art, too.”

One of the more underrated projects in the 2020 brochure is “The Quarry,” which lacks, at this point, a targeted completion date. To Beersheba activist Ethelea Katzanell, that’s unfortunate.

“The quarry – a hole in the heart of the city – is really an important ancient geological site located between the Bet and Daled neighborhoods,” she says. “Lots of people don’t even know it’s there – it’s fenced off, so you’d have to make a special effort to see it.

“I’m surprised this project isn’t being pushed forward – it has a big potential for quick implementation, and doesn’t involve a tremendous amount of money.”

The influential Katzanell serves on a host of city advisory boards. “I’m on the Environmental Committee, the Historical Site Committee and both the Tourist and Beautification Committees,” Katzanell laughs, as she ticks the assignments off. “Anything having to do with what the city offers people, both residents and tourists alike. To me, the Quarry is such an important asset to Beersheba, and one so close to completion, we should be moving ahead on this now.

“The history is fascinating. It started back in the 1980s. when the BGU Geology Department studied the area and proposed turning the quarry into a geological site – you can see the strata going back millions of years. They presented the idea to the city as an educational and tourist site very much like other geological sites all over the world. Nothing happened. They couldn’t find a sponsor.

“In 1994, the project was resurrected. An English version of the proposal was written up and presented again. All the city offices signed off on it, permits were approved, everything was ready – even a sponsor had been found, a French donor.

“Just as it was ready to go, the sponsor, for whatever reason, withdrew. And the project dropped out of sight, again.

“In 2007, I heard a rumor that the project was going to be killed – that a tower was going to be built on the Quarry site,” Katzanell continued. “I was horrified. I rewrote the project for a third time, included everything that had been proposed before, and turned it over to “Earth’s Promise,” a local environmental organization. Together with their experts, geologists and environmentalists, they proposed the creation of a Geo-botanical Park and Center for Environmental Education, in conjunction with the Nature Protection Society. The Park would include all the geographical distinctions, the strata marks, plus all the unique local vegetation for teaching and study.

“I’m surprised another sponsor hasn’t been found. This is a relatively modest project in terms of cost, and the city has already signed off on it. The Quarry Project could be completed pretty easily. I’m hoping that now, in 2010, we can finally move ahead with this.”

Other groups – like Beersheba’s Yad Sarah chapter – also long for their scheduled due date. A new Yad Sarah building is very near completion, exactly on target, says local director Michael Benson.

“I’m not sure when the official grand opening will be held, but on my calendar, I’ve marked August 22 as the day we stop seeing clients at our old location and start seeing them in the new building,” he says. “It can’t happen fast enough.”

Still today, Yad Sarah volunteers work out of a 300-sq.-meter building. “Our new three-story building will have 3,800 square meters,” Benson says. “I’m spending time right now rounding up many more volunteers to help because as soon as we make the move, we’ll be able to offer so many more services. We need lots more help.”

“We’re incredibly cramped where we are,” Benson admits. “We don’t even have space for volunteers to sit. Just recently we took on two new volunteers – one in charge of getting more volunteers, the other in charge of PR – but the only place either of them can find to sit is at my desk. So when they use my desk and my telephone, I have to go somewhere else.

“We run a program offering free legal advice, but when the lawyer is here, he uses my desk too, so again, I have to move elsewhere. Probably worse than inconvenience is the lack of privacy. People come in needing help with some very personal problems they’d rather not broadcast. But there’s nowhere private they can go to explain.

“We just can’t wait to get into the new building. A lot of people tell me, ‘When you get moved into that new building, you’ll have so much space you won’t know what to do.’ That makes me laugh. Have no fear on that score: I know exactly what I’m going to do!”

Among the new services will be an exhibition to help people know and understand what kind of equipment they need to borrow.

“We’ll have occupational therapists – all volunteers – on hand to make sure the correct equipment is offered. We’ll expand our equipment repair facility. If we can repair more of our damaged equipment, we’ll save money, too.

“We have many other programs to add, too; helping senior citizens with home repairs is just one. But right now, I’m looking for another lawyer who speaks Russian so we can expand our legal advice service.

“At the moment, we have one Russian-speaking lawyer, a Beduin, who’s our most sought-after volunteer. He speaks Arabic, Hebrew, Russian and English. Now, sometimes, people who need his help have to wait two or three weeks for an appointment. When we get moved, we need several more like him.”

All of this is just a small part of Danilovich’s “2020” vision for Beersheba. Some of the most important parts feature enhancements being made to existing neighborhoods and the improvement to existing services. The brochure specifies that the city goal is to take three older neighborhoods a year, renovate and redevelop them, redoing the infrastructure, adding green features, upgrading streets and sidewalks.

Bus riders will be happy to hear that improvements in the public transportation system are in the works, too. Four new bus lines with 120 buses will be added for improved service. All in all, over the next five years, more than a billion shekels will

be invested in Beersheba.

New residential neighborhoods will spring up, too. In the western part of the city, 1,200 dunams are being developed by the Ministry of Housing and the city, which will add some 1,500 high-quality private homes, scheduled to be completed by 2011.

“People should know they won’t have to move to Omer or Meitar if they want a lovely single-family home,” the mayor says.

Is all of this possible? Is the “2020” plan viable?

Activist Katzanell says yes. “I didn’t play any direct part in putting together this brochure,” she says. “But I’m delighted with the plans and the timelines the mayor has offered. Sometimes I hear people saying, ‘It’s all just promises that have been made before,’ or ‘This is just another glossy brochure we’ll throw in the garbage.’

“That’s not right – not this time. What Rubik has proposed here isn’t unrealistic at all. I believe fully 95% of what he’s promised will come to pass in the time he specified – the only exceptions might be some of the long-term wishes and goals he’s identified, things out beyond the 10-year scope.

“I don’t think any of this visionary plan amounts to blind promises or wishful thinking. These things are real. They can be done – and, as you can see, some of them are being completed even before their scheduled date.”

As for the rest of the population, what do they think? Overall, the reaction seems to be a mixture of pride with cautious optimism. People might shy away from investing too much hope in such a great endeavor, just in case it doesn’t happen. Even so, most would probably echo one lady, who smiled and said, “I’m chuffed! It makes me proud to live in Beersheba. It’ll be fun to watch it happen. Someday we’ll all be talking about what life was like here, before all this.”

Not that concerns haven’t been expressed, too. Some fret about the water use, wondering if there isn’t a better way to use even recycled water. Others worry that all the watery elements will raise the local humidity and make summers hotter, not cooler. Then there are those who say, “Beersheba is a desert city. It’s supposed to

be brown!” And a few who sigh, “But I like Beersheba just the way it is!”

As we all know, the only constant is change. And if change is inevitable, Beersheba could do worse than new parks, new museums, new sports arenas, new neighborhoods and upgrades in everything else, all over the city.

And let’s not forget boats in Beersheba! Now there’s change that’s fun to believe in...



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