

GRIDLOCK

THE MUNICIPALITY'S PLAN TO REVITALIZE RAINBOW STREET HAS BEEN INCREDIBLY SUCCESSFUL. BUT HOW WILL THEY PREVENT IT BEING TOO SUCCESSFUL FOR ITS OWN GOOD?

Words by Sandra Hiari. Photography by Nicholas Seeley.

IT WASN'T THAT LONG ago—just 2007—that an article appeared in *The Jordan Times*, titled “To Kill the Goose that Lays the Golden Egg.” Its author, Jordanian architect and historian Mohammad Al Asad, posed the question of what would happen if the proliferation of new businesses in the increasingly popular Jabal Amman area wasn't brought under control. His answer: degradation of the urban fabric, excessive traffic, noise and pollution, leading the people who made the area popular in the first place—both residents and visitors—to forsake it for somewhere more pleasant.

Call it a prophecy. The multitude of restaurants, bars and coffee shops that have opened on Rainbow Street since the municipality gave it a facelift in 2008 have indeed come with a frustrating set of urban problems, particularly traffic related. These came to a head in June and July, as residents petitioned HE Mayor Omar Maani to take action.

The area around Rainbow Street is one of Amman's few truly mixed-use neighborhoods, where private residences sit side-by-side with shops, cafes and small offices, allowing people to live, work and play in the same space.

Even on weeknights, the area is often slammed with a car count far exceeding the capacity of parking spots. On weekends, when the popular Souq Jara holds evening concerts, the streets become nigh impassable; stories of hour-long backups on Rainbow, Mutran and Zahran streets are becoming common.

“It's the success [of the area] that is creating a problem,” said Gerry Post, founder of the Amman Institute for Urban Development. (Full disclosure: the author of this piece also works for the insitute.)

Owners of businesses in the area tended to agree.

“GAM did a great job with the Rainbow

Street project,” said Madian Aljazeera, owner of Books@Cafe, the bookstore and restaurant that's the area's oldest hot spot. “They blew life into the street again. They helped bring that back. They should do more.”

But residents' tolerance is beginning to wear thin. On June 15, nearly 300 sent a letter to the mayor asking him to solve the traffic problem. People who live near Rainbow street complained they couldn't make it through to their homes, and fretted about what the dense traffic would mean for ambulances and civil defense vehicles. More broadly, they worried the disorganized com-

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mercial and touristic boom in the area would cause it to lose the authenticity that made it attractive in the first place.

So far, at least, there's no evidence that Rainbow Street is on the verge of losing its appeal. Samir Saikali, a manager at Shower-mama, a fast-food restaurant that recently opened on Rainbow Street, said he's not seeing the traffic and noise affecting business.

“We are doing well, better every day,” he said. “There are a lot of bars down in the area. People get hungry and hit the *shawarma* and *falafel* places up Rainbow Street.”

Aljazeera's business still seems to be going strong, as is trade at the nearby Souq Jara. But some business owners said they understood the residents' point of view.

“I agree with the residents 100 percent—and I am part of the problem,” said Aljazeera. He pointed out that he paid

JD50,000 to GAM in order to get his business exempted from the zoning requirement that would make him to provide parking spots for customers.

“I'm sure GAM doesn't want to ruin the area,” said Tarek Zuriekat, who moved into Jabal Amman five years ago. “GAM must control licenses in the area: don't grant them just because somebody asked.”

Zuriekat and Samira Shammass Goussous have been the architects of the latest resident mobilization initiative, talking to residents and collecting signatures.

Zuriekat hopes the drive will be “a positive experience for people: to stop being passive and see to what extent they can be part of the decision-making process.”

The petitioners expressed their willingness to work with City Hall on finding solutions by forming a committee of representatives, and the mayor responded.

On the first, blazing Saturday in July, almost 70 people met with Maani and city officials to discuss their problems. The mayor admitted the traffic problem was serious, and asked the residents to go ahead with forming a small committee; he also promised to assign two liaison officers to follow up with them.

The residents acted quickly, and one week later they met at the King Hussein Cultural Center, in a hall GAM provided, to elect their representatives. But finding a solution to the problem will still be a challenge. At the meeting, GAM stressed a couple of measures it hoped to take. One major concern was stopping, or at least slowing, the rapid proliferation of new entertainment venues.

“The street is zoned as a commercial one. GAM can't prevent coffee shops from sprouting in the area,” Maani said. But he also said he wouldn't allow more restaurants and coffee shops to open up there at the present time.



AS MORE RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CAFES HAVE OPENED UP ON RAINBOW STREET, TRAFFIC IN THE AREA HAS GROWN STEADILY WORSE.

Parking is obviously of prime concern. Maani also said he had commissioned a traffic analysis of the area, and that GAM was already exploring a number of alternative parking spaces that could be made available, both on Rainbow street itself and in the nearby area. Possible solutions included adding spaces on to existing parking garages, and opening up space currently used by the police. GAM has already rented out the Bishop's School playground as a parking area, and is setting up a shuttle bus on Rainbow Street, according to a statement the mayor's office emailed to *JO*. In the meeting, Maani also said he would not license any new restaurants and coffee shops that could not demonstrate that they had appropriate parking and car drop-off space.

Residents had a variety of opinions on what traffic solutions could be.

"No rocket science is needed to solve the traffic problem," said Aljazeera. "Enforce what is being enforced on Rainbow Street to the rest of the area: introduce parking on one side and one-way traffic."

Zuriekat was reluctant to offer answers. "It needs experts to come up with solutions, I don't have the capacity," he said. He did suggest that non-residents' cars could be prevented from entering the area at certain hours.

Al Asad, who wrote the prescient article about the problem in 2007, suggested a number of rough solutions in an e-mail to *JO*. The first was to limit the number and size of restaurants, cafés and clubs in the area. The second was to restrict parking in the area for non-residents, to encourage people to come by taxi or public transportation. He also suggested using satellite parking locations with a shuttle service running to and from them.

Finally, he said, creating other similar areas of attraction could help relieve some of the pressure.

Post agreed on the benefit of keeping cars at remote locations: "Limiting the traffic lanes ... would also increase space for pedestrians," he said.

And then, of course, there's Souq Jara, the

Friday market that's now one of the area's biggest draws. Policymakers have been forced to consider the fact that the market is a major contributor to the congestion problem.

"The *souq* is successful," Maani said. "We don't want to shut it down. ... The problem with the *souq* is how it's used. We want to look at its operational hours; we need to control that."

Everyone hopes to preserve Rainbow Street's mix of residential and commercial character.

"The area has a strong residential presence; we don't want people moving out of it. We want it to be a mixed-use area," Maani said.

Al Asad stressed the same point.

"Such neighborhoods, where people can comfortably walk to many basic services, need to be protected as models for urban living," he said.

Aljazeera agreed: "I don't want people on the lower end of the scale to leave, and I don't want people on the upper end of the scale to invade." ■