

Capital begins to take shape

- Last Updated: March 12. 2009 1:03AM UAE / March 11. 2009 9:03PM GMT



Falah al Ahabbi, general manager of the Urban Planning Council, discusses the Capital District plan, scheduled to begin within a year. Maisam Darwish / The National

ABU DHABI // The development of the Capital District will lessen the burden of traffic on Abu Dhabi island and help cement the identity of the country, analysts said yesterday.

The 4,500-hectare district will house government buildings, embassies and universities. City planners hope the area will emulate federal districts such as Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.

“It’s good for the image of a capital city,” said Richard Wagner, architect and vice president of the Architectural Association of the UAE. “Capital districts usually have a prestigious display of architecture; it allows them to show they have something to demonstrate. It can become a matter of identity for the people living in the city.”

By 2030, the area is expected to be served by public transit networks connecting it to the downtown core. It is also to include a low-density residential area with a capacity of about 370,000.

Shahswar al Balushi, executive director of the Abu Dhabi branch of international Urban Land Institute, said that by diversifying the direction of traffic, bottlenecks and traffic jams could be alleviated significantly. “If you’re looking at the movement of people – most of whom working in government are locals – you need to look at where they live and look at the flow of traffic to the capital city,” he said.

“Defragmenting government buildings has the advantage of potentially reducing traffic; it will be going to different places, you can reduce parking spaces.”

But people also need access to government buildings and the services they provide easily,

he said, something that could be improved further by making more work digital, and reducing the need for people to visit buildings in person.

“If people can do stuff on the internet, it doesn’t require any physical movement. Then there’s no addition to traffic.”

The most conspicuous weakness in the plan for the Capital City district, Mr al Balushi said, was the assumption that people would move there, more specifically that the people who will work there will leave their current dwellings.

“It’s a risky assumption, it could lead to difficulty,” he said.

Construction is scheduled to begin early next year, with embassies expected to be among the first to move to the site.

At present, most embassies are scattered largely around two locations on Abu Dhabi island, Manasir and al Saada Street.

Wolfgang Brühlhart, the Swiss ambassador to the UAE, confirmed that Switzerland was among the countries that had agreed to move its embassy to the Capital District.

He said the “master concept is good”, adding that it was advantageous for government institutions to close to each other.

“Networking will be more effective; in Bern, all the government buildings are close to each other and it facilitates co-ordination as you can reach other ministries easily.” One employee at the British Embassy, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said: “The key point for all embassies is whether they can do business effectively.

“They need to be close to government ministries but there needs to be infrastructure in place for members of the public to be able to visit them,” he said.

Mr al Balushi said government buildings bring activity only during the day; in the evenings, employees go home.

That, he said, could become a problem for security.

“It depends on what kind of entertainment they’re creating for people who live near government buildings, but if the offices are separate from downtown, then at night there will be no action; it will be dead. There won’t be any activity for kids.” Mr Wagner said the absence of street life during the evenings could pose a problem for children living in the neighbourhoods.