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Skolkovo to Join Moscow in July, President Says

By Rachel Nielsen

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Just days after Sergei Shoigu, the next governor of the Moscow region, said in a radio interview that he wasn't sold on the idea of expanding Moscow's boundaries, President Dmitry Medvedev and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin sat a chair away from him at a government meeting on Monday and detailed the city's expansion plans.

As Monday's meeting suggested, the plans to take land from the Moscow region and add it to the capital — and use the additional area to build a global financial center and ease the capital's choking traffic and exploding population — appear firmly in the hands of top federal planners and those who support the expansion.

Medvedev used Monday's meeting to confirm that the nascent Skolkovo innovation hub to the city's west should be included in the redrawn capital; to proclaim that housing in the new parts of the capital should consist "for the most part" of low-rise buildings; and to lay out timelines for road construction and the transfer of government institutions to the new area.

Moscow's territory will officially increase on July 1, when it will grow by about 2 1/2 times, Medvedev said Monday. That change will happen less than two months after Shoigu assumes his new role.

Shoigu was tapped last week to become governor of the populous area that rings the capital after Vladimir Putin's presidential inauguration in May.

Medvedev announced his plan to create a Capital Federal District and enlarge Moscow at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June. Since then government officials have proposed stretching the southwest boundaries of the capital, as well as including other spots of land west of Moscow.

In December the Federation Council approved the plan to change the capital's and the region's borders, adding close to 150 hectares to Moscow from the region, RIA-Novosti reported.

The suggested addition of the Skolkovo innovation center, in the Moscow region town of the same name, to the capital is part of an effort to increase Moscow's role in high-tech industries. In a similar vein, Troitsk, the suburban home to many scientists and academics about 20 kilometers southwest of the city, should also become part of the capital, Medvedev confirmed.

"We are expecting from Moscow a substantial increase in its contribution to the innovation development of our country," he said, according to a transcript on the Kremlin website.

Speaking in Troitsk, the president said most of the housing constructed in the new area should be low-rise apartment buildings. That would be a substantial change from the high-rises ringing the city's southern outskirts.

"I am proposing that we examine several ideas, including the possibility of a complete ban on constructing housing with old techniques in the merged areas," he said.

Improving living conditions for Muscovites is one of the priorities the Kremlin is laying out in the plans. "By many measures of quality of life, Moscow — to put it mildly — isn't a leader," Medvedev said. "Some measures of development even have begun to decline."

The president, whose term expires in May, said reconstruction of Kaluzhskoye Shosse, which extends from the city's southwest, will begin this year as should development of "traffic light-free" traffic to the center of Moscow.

In addition, "all of the key decisions" for relocating government offices to the southwestern addition to the capital should be made in this fiscal year, he said.

Presidential economic aide Arkady Dvorkovich told NTV reporters on the sidelines of the meeting that actually moving government offices won't happen before the end of 2013.

In his speech, Sobyanin said the plans to redraft Moscow's borders will not involve merging the entire Moscow region into the capital. The mayor also proposed a "unified fare system" for all forms of mass transit in the city and said the government plans to "give priority development" to a commuter rail system.

Funding is a sticky issue in the expansion plans. Boris Gromov, the outgoing Moscow region governor, told RIA-Novosti that he has asked the Kremlin to consider how revenue will be collected from the Moscow region in light of the proposed changes.

Meanwhile, Shoigu said over the weekend that tax revenue from Moscow region residents who work in Moscow should go to the region, Ekho Moskvy reported Monday.

Shoigu, who has held his cabinet position since 1994 and is the longest-serving cabinet member, suggested Friday during a radio interview with Russian News Service radio that the country's capital should be relocated to Siberia.

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