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Balashikha Residents Protest Urban Planning Policy

By Oleg Sukhov

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BALASHIKHA, Moscow Region — Several dozen residents of Balashikha, a Moscow suburb, marched peacefully over the weekend to protest a local urban development plan that they say will wipe out green areas and drastically increase the burden on infrastructure with more housing.

As a result of new housing projects, the number of residents in this city, located northeast of Moscow, is expected to increase to 370,000 people, from the current 230,000.

The situation is representative of the entire Moscow region, whose proximity to the capital aggravates transportation and other problems.

Saturday's protest, which was sanctioned by City Hall, came after residents said their concerns were ignored at public hearings on the city's development plans.

"People are turning public hearings into protests because there are no efforts to solve transportation and other problems," Olga Zinovyeva, an urban planning specialist at Moscow State University, said by e-mail. The authorities "only want to build and sell more, contributing to traffic congestion."

Public hearings held in January for the urban development plan ended in a scandal, with opponents crying "Shame!" and leaving the building.

No one was available at Balashikha's City Hall to comment by phone Monday.

The weekend protest was headlined by Yevgenia Chirikova, an opposition leader who has focused on environmental issues in Khimki, another Moscow suburb. It was attended by activists from the liberal Yabloko party, the pro-business Right Cause party and the Communist Party.

The beginning of the event was accompanied by the revolutionary "Che Guevara Song." Two younger protesters chanted "crooks and thieves, you have five minutes to leave," but elderly and less Internet-savvy protesters failed to join in, apparently unfamiliar with the widespread opposition slogan addressed to the Kremlin.

One protester carried a picture with top City Hall official Alexei Dedkov's face crossed out, while a portrait of Balashikha's second-in-command Arsen Kumratov read "agent provocateur."

Yulia Shapchenko, a representative of the Musora Bolshe Net (No More Garbage) environmental group, said the urban development plan envisaged increasing the amount of housing and, as a result, the number of residents and cars. But Balashikha's transportation and social infrastructure was not sufficient to cope with it, and there are few commuter trains and other means of transportation linking Moscow with Balashikha, she said.

Another protester, Tatyana Zaitseva, said the situation with transportation in Balashikha was already disastrous, and it was very difficult to travel to Moscow because of traffic jams.

Shapchenko also said the urban development plan did not stipulate any major environmental measures and the authorities were doing little to remove garbage. "The authorities do not want to dispose of waste," she said.

She said locals used to frequent some green areas in Balashikha to enjoy nature and escape busy city life. But now, she said, those spots resemble the barren post-apocalyptic landscape in "Stalker," a cult science fiction movie directed by Andrei Tarkovsky.

The protesters criticized the planned construction of waste treatment facilities on a Neolithic site in the city's Akatovo district, arguing that the project was expected to be implemented with legal violations and without prior archeological excavations.

The authorities are also cutting down forests, including the Losiny Ostrov Forest, to make quick money, Shapchenko said.

Tatyana Sadykova, head of Balashikha's environment and natural resources department, was featured on one of the posters as a "distinguished lumberjack."

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