Making Moscow a Comfortable Place to Live

By [Darrell Stanaford](#)

June 17, 2013

Last week, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin presented Moscow's priorities for the next five years with a report titled "Moscow: A City that Is Comfortable for Life."

Some people may immediately decide that it is just part of his election campaign. But if you look at the seven priorities and compare them to the changes that are actually happening in Moscow, you will see it is a real program that is shaping the future of the city where many of us work and live. Therefore, we should all take the time to understand it — and participate in it.

Developing
a multicentric
Moscow means
creating
transport hubs

outside the city
center.

Take, for example, Sobyanin's Priority No. 7, which he calls "Open Moscow." Residents of Moscow have the opportunity and the civil obligation to participate in developing Moscow's future. Beginning at the first public Urban Forum hosted by the Moscow government in 2011, Sobyanin stated that Moscow cannot achieve its goals through top-down measures. Open Moscow seeks to "develop independent local management" — that is, to decentralize decision-making on neighborhood issues and to create transparency in government services. A visit to the Moscow City Hall website reveals several new portals for use by residents, from paying taxes and fees to guides to parking services, public transportation and road construction. From online surveys to open hearings, the city government is seeking input from Muscovites and integrating their ideas and feedback into the city's development.

Sobyanin's six other priorities list the key qualities that will define Moscow. They are the crystallization of two years of intensive study of Moscow and its role in Russia and the world. It involved the wide engagement of local and international experts, partly with the assistance of nonprofit, educational organizations, such as the Urban Land Institute. It is clear that the priorities were carefully chosen to balance social and economic goals. They are based not on fashionable themes but upon Moscow's real history and strengths, particularly in the areas of culture, education and science. They address the key issues for Moscow's global economic competitiveness: transport, investment climate, education and quality of life.

Can these goals be achieved?

Overall realization of the program greatly depends on the transformation of Moscow into a multicentric city where new centers of employment and economic activity are located beyond the historical center. In such districts, educational, medical and research and development clusters will thrive.

The greatest challenge in creating multiple centers is overcoming the structure of the existing transportation network that funnels all kinds of traffic through the historical center. The history of urban development shows us that the easy access to a location created by the intersection of multiple modes of transportation is the seed that starts growth and the magnet that attracts workers and residents.

New centers will grow most effectively around transport interchanges located outside the center that provide a direct connection to other districts outside the center. The greater the percentage of the city's population that can reach a new center without going through downtown Moscow, the greater will be its success. Moscow's industrial zones offer the best opportunities for the creation of new centers because of their locations, scale and the opportunity to tie them into the existing transportation network via new transport interchanges.

The most developed example of a new business district is Moskva-City, but it currently suffers from two major problems: a lack of sufficient transport options to reach it and a concept that consists of many poorly integrated separate projects. The first problem should be

solved by the planned new metro and rail connections. The second problem will only be solved with the completion of construction and agreement among the many owners to connect their projects with high quality, pedestrian-friendly public areas.

But most of the new business districts will not be filled with skyscrapers like a Moskva-City. New districts will offer middle-class Muscovites places to live, work, shop and relax with their families — all within a 3 or 4 kilometer radius. Such balanced districts will provide the "comfortable urban surroundings" of the plan's priority No. 4. Some will be built around major educational institutions, while others around medical and other research facilities. Many may appear within the next five years but will take a decade or more to mature into major new centers of urban life.

The city also understands the daunting, long-term nature of the investments required to turn these ambitious plans into reality. Some Moscow developers complain that the government plans a top-down approach, where only government-owned real estate investors and banks will get major projects. Sobyanin and his team have said many times that the volume of investment needed is far too large to be funded by the government and that most of the capital must come from the private sector.

Developing a multicentric Moscow will not be possible without talented risk-takers to invest in new businesses and without equally talented professors, doctors, bankers and computer programmers to fill those businesses, institutes and research laboratories. The government has realized that Moscow must become a city that is, in Sobyanin's words, "comfortable for life." And all of us living and working in Moscow have the opportunity to take part in it.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/06/17/making-moscow-a-comfortable-place-to-live-a25001