Treasury official: Gov't funding biased against Arabs

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Government funding discriminates against Israel's Arab citizens, according to the Finance Ministry's supervisor of budgets.

"The allocation method toward Arabs in Israel is not equitable," supervisor of budgets Amir Levy told TheMarker. "There are large gaps in resources allocated in public transportation, distribution of income from municipal business taxes and from industrial zones shared by Jewish and Arab communities, and in education," he said.

Levy made the remarks during a visit Thursday to the Lower Galilee town of Sakhnin together with Finance Minister Yair Lapid, other senior treasury officials, and Science and Technology Minister Jacob Perry.

The delegation also met with a group of Arab mayors during the visit, the purpose of which was to encourage greater participation by Arabs in the workforce in Israel and to improve educational, transportation and social infrastructure to foster that goal. The two ministers said the government was committed to promoting programs for excellence in the Arab community and to seriously address problems that are troubling the community.

At the end of the visit, Levy discussed the need for essential corrections to funding for the Arab population, mentioning gaps in various areas including the education system, construction of day care centers, public transportation and new sources of income from commercial areas.

See **BIASED**, *Page 2*

BIASED

Continued from page 1

For example, he said, a student in the second lowest socioeconomic cluster (almost exclusively Arab communities) receives 20 percent less funding than a student in the fifth socioeconomic cluster (almost all Jewish communities). In employment, only 2 to 3 percent of industrial and business zones belong to Arab towns. Per capita income generated by Arab municipalities lags 60 percent behind per capita income generated by Jewish municipalities. Arab communities also take in 72 percent less municipal taxes from businesses than their Jewish counterparts, and lack commercial areas where such businesses can open; Arab communities have 50 percent less commercial area than Jewish communities relative to their size. Most income from municipal taxes in Arab towns comes from residential premises and it is very difficult for towns to support themselves this way, Levy said.

Levy said the gaps in allocating resources have existed for 60 years now and so stopgap measures will no longer work. He said the visit of the two ministers and their officials, the first in many years of such a high-ranking delegation to the Arab community, shows the government's commitment to change in this regard.

"We have responsibility for the situation in the Arab community, we are not shirking it," Levy said.

However, according to Levy, Arab local authorities also bear responsibility for their situation, noting that local authorities do not often turn for assistance to government ministries or pressure officials. "The mayors have the responsibility to take the initiative," he said. They can't sit and wait to be helped. Just like Jewish mayors knock on the doors of all the relevant ministries and know all the relevant officials, that's how the Arab mayors must act."

Levy mentioned the significant contribution of the Russian immigration of the 1990s and said that for Israel's future growth, it had to see Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox join the workforce in greater numbers. For the economy and the state to prosper, Arabs must become more involved in the workforce, especially Arab women, only 29 percent of whom work outside the home. For example, he said it should be made possible for Arab women who are pharmacists and teachers – two of the most common professions Arab women choose – to make a career change to the field of high-tech.

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