

Is Samarkand ready to become a Green City?

Environmental protection and stakeholder engagement state of play



Photo: CEE Bankwatch Network

In 2021, Samarkand became the first city¹ in Uzbekistan to improve its sustainability planning by joining the EUR 3 billion Green Cities flagship programme run by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). As a result, there are plans for EUR 95 million² in electric buses and the development of an action plan for 'greening' the city, which outlines environmental improvements aimed at moving towards carbon neutrality. Public consultations on

¹ [Samarkand](#), *EBRD Green Cities*, accessed 19 December 2022.

² European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, [GrCF2 W2 E2 - Samarkand E-Bus Project](#), *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, accessed 19 December 2022.

For more information

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the proposed Green City Action Plan (GCAP) to address the needs and interests of a broad range of stakeholders are compulsory according to the EBRD's guidelines.

Existing urban development plans

The elaboration of the urban development plan is part of the Strategy of New Uzbekistan Development for 2022-2026, which aims to turn Samarkand into a city of millions, introduce a 'city comfort index' to assess the quality of life and improve the quality of digitalisation, construction and urban design within the framework of the 'smart city' concept.

Over the past five years, Samarkand has implemented and continues to implement a range of urban development plans and programmes:

- 'Modernisation of solid waste management in the city of Samarkand'³ funded by the French Development Agency;
- 'Modernisation of infrastructure in Samarkand' funded by the Abu –Dhabi Fund for Development;
- 'Programme of measures for accelerated development of the tourist potential of Samarkand in 2017-2019';
- A master plan for transport in Samarkand.⁴

The objectives of these projects were announced as follows:

- Protecting the environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as well as improving public health and sanitary conditions;
- Improving Samarkand's infrastructure for roads, housing and communal services;
- Developing and increasing the tourism potential of Samarkand city and the surrounding region;
- Ensuring the dynamic development of modern tourism infrastructure in the region, expanding the list of tourism services and improving the quality of state services provided, and improving the quality of tourism services according to modern demands;

³ Maroqand Obod, [“Модернизация управления твёрдыми бытовыми отходами в городе Самарканде” с участием Французского агентства развития, Maroqand Obod, 14 January 2022.](#)

⁴ [Публичный информационный ресурс о разработке транспортного мастер-плана города Самарканда, Samarkand Transport, accessed 19 December 2022.](#)

- Ensuring the sustainable development of all types of transport, increasing the efficiency of using the street and road network, creating conditions for modern and comfortable public transport and safe conditions for transport and pedestrians.

Key environmental and social concerns raised by residents

The rapid growth of the population in Samarkand (from 391,000 in 1991 to 551,700 in 2021) and the plan to increase the city's population to 1 million have resulted in an increase in traffic, as well as the massive growth of housing and other types of construction. It is also alarming that Samarkand – one of the oldest and most historic cities in the world, with a 2,700-year history – is at risk of losing some cultural heritage sites of historic and artistic value due to rapid urbanisation.

Analysis of relevant social media discussions and mass media publications⁵ in Samarkand shows that residents are concerned with the following issues:

- The lack of environmental and sanitary control of the main dumpsite in Samarkand, which is located close to the Kimegarlar residential area and the Dargom irrigation canal;
- Groundwater contamination due to waste mismanagement;
- The lack of waste segregation and recycling;
- The discharge of wastewater into the Siab irrigation canal, which is used by farmers in the Samarkand, Tailyak and Akdarya regions;
- The failure of the drainage system due to the limiting of natural collectors in Siabcha, Chashma and Obimashad, as well as the spot development of coastal areas, which results in floods causing damage to property, the environment and public health;
- Air pollution, associated health risks and the lack of public information on air quality;
- A decrease in green spaces due to urban development and ineffective tree planting;
- The demolition of private property in violation of legislation, resulting in mass social resistance;
- Water, electricity and gas supply problems due to outdated infrastructure and the low proliferation of energy-efficient technologies;

⁵ Based on the monitoring and analysis of the groups in Facebook social media Samarkand News (23.5K), I am a Samarkand resident (45K), Consumers of Samarkand (16.7K), Samarkand & Samarkand residents 2 (37K), Telegram channels and traditional online media (newspaper *Samarkand Vestnik*, websites *STV*, *Samcity*, *gazeta.uz*, *podrobno.uz*, *nuz.uz*, *anhor.uz*).

- Poor accessibility of urban infrastructure and services for people with a disability;
- An increase in traffic accidents and problems with public transport;
- A lack of public consultations on urban development programmes.

Review of key concerns about public transport development

In Samarkand, there are 17 private public transport carriers and one state-owned enterprise: the tram department. To date, 21 of 60 public transport routes have been cancelled in the city and 300 buses are missing. There are several reasons for this:

- The pandemic lockdown resulted in a decline in passenger traffic, limiting companies' ability to repay their loans. This meant they had to sell some buses in order to repay their debts.
- Changed routes and traffic schedules due to long-lasting road reconstruction resulted in low profits for transport companies.
- There was a lack of financial opportunities to support the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in public transport.
- The city government failed to subsidise public transport because of the low proliferation of electronic payment systems.
- There was a decrease in the use of public transport (around 36 per cent) due to the lack of a convenient and stable schedule, as companies wanted to operate only at the most demanding (and therefore profitable) times;
- Proper public infrastructure is lacking. This includes bus stops that comply with the legal requirements, updated and accurate schedules, trained staff (drivers and fee-takers), traffic lights and issues with the overall culture of driving.

In April 2022, Samarkand's transport master plan was presented.⁶ It includes a range of planned activities:

- Open 40 new routes, including five express routes to link the airport, the railway station and the historic city centre.
- Introduce large-capacity buses and allocate a separate lane for them.

⁶ Samarkand Transport, [Транспортный мастер-план Самаркандской агломерации представлен президенту Узбекистана](#), Samarkand Transport, 6 May 2022.

- Increase the number of public transport stops.
- Construct an additional 52 traffic lights, introduce an automated traffic control system and develop vehicle detectors.
- Improve and develop additional tram infrastructure.
- Establish some public transport hubs.
- Develop cycling infrastructure (up to 101 kilometres of cycling paths).
- Make dedicated lines for priority public transport (up to 32 kilometres).

Many Samarkand residents feel skeptical about electric buses as a ‘silver bullet’ solution to the city’s public transport problems. On 14 July 2022 in the ‘Samarkand News’ Facebook group, a survey called ‘Pros and cons of electric buses in Samarkand’ was conducted. Of 242 participants, 36 per cent said that the improvements in drivers’ skills and overall driving culture should come before introducing electric buses, 14 per cent raised concerns about the technical limitations of electric buses given the city’s electricity shortages and 7 per cent called for the development of other types of public transport alongside the introduction of electric buses.

Civil society actors and involvement

There is a wide range of civil society actors in Samarkand:

- non-profit, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) registered with the legal authorities;
- ‘*mahalla*’ (meetings of citizens, local self-government system) acting on behalf of residents but controlled by state authorities and administrative bodies;
- community action groups;
- mass media;
- public activists and volunteers;
- bloggers.

To include all these groups in discussions about the development of the GCAP, we recommend the following steps:

- Develop an information platform such as a website, social media page or Telegram channel to facilitate a public discussion of the GCAP and track its progress.

- Initiate a memorandum of cooperation with NGOs interested in public consultations about their role and the value of community engagement.
- Raise awareness of the GCAP by developing promotional content that engages residents.
- Encourage mass media and bloggers to cover GCAP-related topics.
- Use public meetings to distribute material that encourages civil society engagement in developing the GCAP.