

# Capital plans network of exercise paths

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Pedestrians enjoy the rubberised track in 32nd Street between 19th and 13th streets.  
Philip Cheung / The National

ABU DHABI // A network of rubber tracks on which people could walk, run or cycle might be created in the capital if there was sufficient demand, a senior municipal official said as the first such path was opened yesterday.

Abdulla al Shamsi, the director of roads and infrastructure for Abu Dhabi Municipality, said the tracks would give people the option of exercising on a comfortable surface and away from traffic.

“This is to enhance the image of the city,” Mr Shamsi said as he stood on the clay-coloured path. “Most importantly, it is to attract people to exercise.”

The two-kilometre-long trial path runs parallel to 32nd Street, in the direction of the Corniche, from the intersection of 19th and 13th streets. It is interrupted only by traffic signals and some construction work near 17th Street.

Eventually, said Mr Shamsi, it would extend to the Corniche.

A feasibility study would be carried out to identify where other paths could be built, he said, adding that it was possible there would be paths throughout the city.

Two other locations for pilot projects have already been earmarked – one near Al Saada bridge and another close to the Intercontinental Hotel. Mr Shamsi did not say what the paths would cost or when they would be completed.

At present, apart from the Corniche, where the concrete pavement is divided into lanes for walking and cycling, few places in the capital are dedicated to jogging or cycling.

Obesity and its related health problems are on the rise in the UAE as a result of inactive lifestyles. At the same time, rapid development is taking over public spaces, including car parks and wasteland where young people have traditionally played sports. Twenty per cent of the population in the UAE has diabetes, the second highest rate in the world. According to World Health Organisation figures for 2005, 69.6 per cent of women over the age of 15 were overweight or obese, as were 66.9 per cent of males.

Medical experts say they are treating young adults in their mid-20s for heart disease caused by lack of exercise and poor diet.

The unveiling of the jogging track was praised by doctors, who said it was an important step towards encouraging healthy living.

“A healthy lifestyle is the smartest and simplest way to treat and even prevent diabetes,” said Dr Maha Barakat, from the Imperial College London Diabetes Centre in Abu Dhabi. “This initiative by Abu Dhabi Municipality is a very encouraging step for the people of the UAE and could set a leading example to governments across the Middle East.”

It was important that people in Abu Dhabi exercise more, said Dr Mudhar Hamadi, of Al Noor Hospital: “We do not exercise – all of us.

“These measures should be implemented as soon as possible.”

Mr Shamsi acknowledged that residents might give the new paths a cool reception during the hot summer months, but said he expected a strong response during the winter.

In 32nd Street, he said, people had already been seen walking on the rubber path, which is easier on joints than the island’s pavements. Gym equipment, such as chin-up bars, would also be installed near the path in 32nd Street, and, once the municipality had assessed how well the path was being received, improvements such as distance markers or dedicated lanes for walking and running could be added.

Residents gave a mixed response to the initiative yesterday, but praised the Government for trying to encourage physical activity. Evin Sabbah, 23, who regularly ran in her home country of Lebanon, where there were open areas for jogging, said she felt uncomfortable jogging in Abu Dhabi because of the crowded streets.

She was unsure how people would react. “Having this project is such a great idea, but usually people are busy at work and only go back home to eat and sleep.” On the other hand, maybe it would “encourage people to go out and exercise during the weekend”.