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Near empty roads allow government to accelerate infrastructure projects

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Construction to extend the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv high-speed train along with work on light rails in both major cities will be fast-tracked in the coming weeks thanks to the strict coronavirus guidelines that have almost entirely emptied streets throughout the country, the Transportation Ministry announced on Monday.

A budget of NIS 900 million (\$252 million) has already been approved by the cabinet for

the pandemic-time project and the Transportation Ministry is seeking to further expand that budget to NIS 2.5 billion (\$700 million).

The Jerusalem-Tel Aviv fast train made its first trip from Navon Station in the capital to Hagana station in south Tel Aviv in December, but authorities said the route would reach other Tel Aviv stations and Herzliya sometime this year.

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Transportation Ministry officials told Channel 12 that with the ability to accelerate their work in the coming weeks, they hope to be able to move up their finish dates by months.





Empty roads in Tel Aviv on March 17, 2020.
(Miriam Alster/FLASH90)

The Tel Aviv and Jerusalem light rails are also slated to benefit from the specially approved budget, with the former not even expected to inaugurate its first line until mid-2022 and the latter plagued with delays as it seeks to extend its already existing line.

Construction to expand the fast lanes in central Israel's Ayalon highway has already begun thanks to NIS 54 million (\$15 million) from the recently approved budget. Other highways to enjoy a jolt in their work for lane expansions include Routes 2, 4 and 5.

Transportation Minister Bezalel Smotrich had pushed for infrastructure workers to be included among those the government deemed as essential personnel so that they would be allowed to continue working, as the vast majority of Israelis have been ordered to remain at home amid the near-lockdown.

“We at the Transportation Ministry are taking advantage of the opportunity created by the coronavirus crisis to accelerate important infrastructure projects on roads and railways,” Smotrich said in a statement, adding that the projects provide some “light” during the difficult times.

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