NEWS LESSON

What Happened to the 170-Kilometre City?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would you live in a city with no private cars?
2. What would you want within ten minutes of your front door?
3. Would a completely planned city make everyday life simpler?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**megaprojects**	☐	A	made smaller than first planned
2	**trade-offs**	☐	B	very impressive to look at
3	**rendering**	☐	C	a computer picture showing how something will look
4	**re-emerges**	☐	D	changed after more thought
5	**scaled-back**	☐	E	appears again after being away
6	**revised**	☐	F	things you give up in order to get something else
7	**spectacular**	☐	G	different ways of understanding something
8	**interpretations**	☐	H	extremely large and expensive building schemes

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A postponement is not a cancellation. But a plan put off for a decade comes back into a world whose costs, technologies and priorities have all moved on.

1 A city 170 kilometres long, built in a straight line through the Saudi desert: The Line was designed to make people look twice. The NEOM proposal promised mirrored buildings and little need for conventional roads. Turning that image into a place where people could live would demand something less spectacular to show: transport, water, power and a workable budget.

2 The proposal was inseparable from a broader national ambition: reducing economic dependence on oil by attracting investment, tourism and high-value industries. Its striking visual identity helped turn an infrastructure plan into an international symbol of technological optimism, which was itself a considerable achievement. Yet the same unprecedented scale that made the project so compelling also complicated any credible assessment of whether it could be delivered.

3 A city in a line would need transport, water, energy and waste systems that work reliably in an extreme environment, where failure is rarely a minor inconvenience. Construction costs and labour requirements add further difficulties, none of which can be resolved by enthusiasm alone. Even where a concept is technically possible, it must still answer a more ordinary question: would people choose to live there, and on what terms?

4 In May 2026, Semafor reported that further work on The Line had been put on hold until after 2030, amid a shift in Saudi investment priorities. That report should not be confused with an official declaration that the project has been permanently cancelled. It does, however, illustrate the uncertainty surrounding the original timetable and the persistent gap between announced ambitions and confirmed delivery, a gap that is hardly unique to Saudi Arabia. Megaprojects elsewhere have been quietly pared back in much the same way, long after the launch films stopped circulating.

5 There are competing interpretations. Advocates of experimental design argue that new solutions need risk, and that even a scaled-back project can produce useful ideas. Sceptics reply that spectacular promises hide difficult trade-offs, especially where public money could improve cities that already exist. Timing matters too: a scheme deferred by a decade re-emerges into a world whose technologies, costs and priorities have all moved on.

6 Ultimately, The Line raises a question of political as well as architectural judgement. Should a government be praised for pursuing an extraordinary vision, or held to account if that vision proves financially unsustainable? Perhaps the real test of a futuristic city is not how impressive it looks in a rendering, but how responsibly its promises are revised once they come into contact with reality, and how honestly that revision is explained to the people paying for it.

Sources: Semafor. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer treats the gap between announced ambitions and delivery as a problem found in other countries too. T F NG
2. The writer expects a project delayed by ten years to return to the same technologies and costs. T F NG
3. The cost of the project has risen by more than half since it was announced. T F NG
4. The text suggests that Semafor's report and an official cancellation amount to the same thing. T F NG
5. The text treats the project's striking image as an achievement that did not settle whether it could be delivered. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

Advocates **conventional** **credible** **deferred** **inseparable** **optimism** **persistent** **sceptics**

1. The minister's explanation was so full of gaps that few economists found it _____ .
2. The two companies had become so _____ that nobody could say where one role ended and the other began.
3. She tried to ignore the _____ cough that had lasted for months.
4. The vote was _____ until the autumn, when fuller figures would be available.
5. Unwilling to follow _____ methods, the team built the bridge in an entirely new way.
6. _____ of the plan argue that its benefits will outweigh the cost, while their opponents disagree.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. A growing sense of _____ surrounds the original timetable. (CERTAIN)
2. The sheer scale of the scheme was _____ in modern planning. (PRECEDENT)
3. Having to queue was a minor _____ for the tourists. (CONVENIENT)
4. Critics doubt that the plan is _____ viable. (FINANCE)
5. An independent _____ of the risks needs evidence from outside the project. (ASSESS)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Notwithstanding and hence are followed by a noun phrase; albeit introduces a small concession. Nonetheless and whereas work across clauses or sentences.

albeit hence lest nonetheless notwithstanding thereby whereas

1. The design was praised for its ambition, _____ with some reservations.
2. _____ its enormous cost, the scheme kept strong political backing for years.
3. Some officials defend the original scale, _____ others favour a more modest first phase.
4. The first phase proved far costlier than forecast; _____ the decision to scale it back.
5. The project has not been formally cancelled. _____ , few observers expect it to be built as announced.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would you ask the people behind a huge new city before moving there?
2. Can a city designed on paper leave room for unexpected ways of living?
3. Would you rather improve an existing city or build a new one?

9 Role-play: shrink the city or keep the dream

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the government adviser

You want to keep the full 170-kilometre plan. Explain why the idea is important. Answer your partner's worries and try to agree a plan.

Student B · the finance officer

You think the city is too costly. You want to make it smaller or wait until after 2030. Ask about the cost and offer a compromise.

Useful phrases

I'm worried about the cost.

We can't give up on this dream now.

What would that mean for the people who live there?

Could we start with a smaller version?

I'd rather wait than waste the money.

Let's agree on a plan we can both support.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you keep the big plan, shrink it or put it off, and why?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 F · 3 C · 4 E · 5 A · 6 D · 7 B · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 F · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 credible · 2 inseparable · 3 persistent · 4 deferred · 5 conventional · 6 Advocates

6 Word forms

1 uncertainty · 2 unprecedented · 3 inconvenience · 4 financially · 5 assessment

7 Language focus

1 albeit · 2 Notwithstanding · 3 whereas · 4 hence · 5 Nonetheless

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