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Office de consultation publique de Montréal
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Re The Future Master Plan of Parc Jean-Drapeau

Greetings,

I recently had the opportunity to visit the beautiful city of Montreal with a couple of colleagues of mine. One of the highlights of our trip, was a firsthand tour of Parc Jean-Drapeau by members of the Société du Parc Jean-Drapeau. It is such an incredible public park that is like no other in the world. In a city filled with so many exceptional places, this is the pièce de résistance.

During the tour we learned that the Society is starting the process to create a new master plan for the park. The development of a new master plan for Parc Jean-Drapeau is a significant undertaking. Parc Jean-Drapeau's cultural and ecological assets span across multiple scales and compositions tied to distinct points in history. The opportunities for this influential cultural landscape are limitless. The reward for a successful design will be a world renown destination that can be used as a model for other cities challenged to integrate culture, ecology, economics, and the human spirit in the face of urbanization and climate change. As a follow up from our tour of the island and based on insight shared by our hosts, we'd like to offer the following observations and recommendations to consider as you move forward in the master plan process. We would be happy to discuss any of these ideas further and can arrange a phone conference as necessary.

1. Natural Systems– Several layers should be considered relative to natural systems, and clear goals for how they are integrated should be established at the outset of the master plan. In order to set these goals, a number of studies should be explored, if they haven't been already.

First, at the Great Lakes scale, what is the ecological significance of this stretch of the St. Lawrence River and how might this impact master planning goals?

- a. What data is available on the historical flora and fauna of the islands and the region? Does information exist from early European settlement? How does this compare to today's species?
- b. Is your team aware of the plants and animals that are threatened, endangered, or noted as species of concern in the region? How can the park better serve them?
- c. What do we know about the islands from available maps of this stretch of the river? Ile Ronde and Ile aux Fraises appear as mere portions of a larger, contiguous Ile Sainte-Hélène today.
- d. How has shipping impacted the channel, the park's islands, the island of Montreal, and the mainland? What are the limits for improving or restoring the natural environment?
- e. A substantial portion of the park's two islands are made of urban fill. How has this impacted the ecosystem? How committed is the park to restoring habitat?
- f. Where does the park's goals for supporting natural systems fall on the spectrum (restoration, re-creation, integration)?
- g. What are the projections for how climate change will impact this region? What does a resilient design mean for Park Jean-Drapeau?

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Second, the park's islands do not take advantage of the water's edge, resulting in a weak relationship to the river. We recommend developing a *Shoreline Framework Plan* that would support the master plan in re-establishing a relationship with the river.

- a. Jacques Cartier noted that this location had "the most violent rapid it is possible to see, which we were unable to pass." While the rapids were visible to me on the tour, I did not hear your team make mention of this, nor did I see anyone trying to traverse through them in a kayak. The rapids are an exciting asset that should be explored for habitat and recreation.
- b. The shoreline of Ile Sainte-Hélène is approximately 10 meters or more above the St. Lawrence River. The banks are nearly vertical and appeared to have little value for habitat or people. The shoreline conditions should be diversified with areas prioritized for habitat, areas for people, and areas that are shared.
- c. Paths are primarily focused toward the inside of the park and there are few, if any, opportunities for visitors to interact with the water. We recommend exploring openings to re-slope the banks, provide a perimeter loop trail with a high-road and low-road options, and create opportunities for visitors to interact with the water (i.e. stepped access, overlooks, kayak launches).

Third, the natural resources inside the park have been impacted by many stages of development over hundreds of years, and especially in the past century. The park now has an adapted environment, but knowing how to best manage the future health of the natural assets lies in understanding the state of the islands prior to development. In the end, this information can be used to determine a vision for how to better integrate the natural resources in the park. We recommend integrating a *Natural Systems Framework* with the master plan that identifies the natural resource assets on and around the park and determines strategies for integration.

- a. How is stormwater managed in the park? Are there opportunities for integrating into a meaningful design?
- b. What is the subgrade throughout the park? Areas of urban fill, excavation of Ile aux Fraises,. Soils are a vital component of natural systems. Areas of disturbance should be evaluated to determine the value they provide to the existing natural systems and the park's design. Opportunities to improve these values by restoring disturbed or degraded landscapes can then be explored.
- c. Have there been any studies done on the forest ecology and the plant communities throughout both islands?
- d. We recommend evaluating the highest and best use for the non-native areas, with intentional and thoughtful programming of cultural and horticultural landscapes, and an emphasis on broader integration of natural systems.

2. Systems-Based Design – building off the Natural Systems study, we recommend developing a more comprehensive study of all the infrastructure systems of the two-island park (supply, use, demand, etc.). This will include energy, potable water, materials, and waste. A premier destination like Parc Jean-Drapeau should consider all forms of sustainability. If you are interested in discussing what this study could entail, or if you would like to review some recent case studies, I would be happy to arrange a phone conversation with experts leading the field on this scale for campuses, institutions, and corporations.
3. Design Elements and Features – a few ideas to consider.
 - a. Gateways/entries to the park – if the desire is to reduce infrastructure for vehicles in the park and to place an emphasis on public transportation, we recommend integrating

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- appropriate gateway features at the public transportation stations. In addition to the gateways, general improvements such as park amenities and visitor welcome information should be easily accessible and highly visible.
- b. Gateways and trail markers to the Levis Tower – despite the fantastic views and beautiful trails through the forest, the Levis Tower has been a place with few visitors. We recommend implementing design elements and signage to help inform users where the trailheads are located, how far to the tower, and how challenging is the terrain.
 - c. Tower approach experience – integrating artistic and interpretive elements could improve the experience. A clear and consistent theme that marks the tower approach from multiple directions would facilitate wayfinding and navigation.
 - d. Roller coaster boardwalk – Develop a sculptural boardwalk by the theme park as part of a continuous shoreline path. This could embrace borrowed scenes and borrowed exhilaration. The forms would be inspired by the geometry of the roller coasters. The path could also make a dramatic drop that could disappear through a tunnel under the water.
 - e. Public art – Much like Montreal as a whole, Parc Jean-Drapeau represents a great variety of art on display. To bring more attention and awareness to these great assets, we recommend exploring opportunities to integrate “art in the landscape” as an experiential tour. This may require relocating some pieces within the park, but every piece should be tied to its surroundings and be part of the landscape around it. This can be achieved through landforms, site engineering, and planting plans. Two places I am most familiar with that achieve this with great success is Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park (Grand Rapids, Michigan) and Kroller Mueller Museum (The Netherlands). A walking tour/audio tour could be crafted to create a museum-like experience for visitors.
 - f. Open green space – not every park attraction needs to be an architecturally designed feature. Sometimes the most popular park attractions (and the most equitable) are flexible, open greenspaces. Create a clearer, more varied, and more intentional network of green spaces throughout the islands as part of the master planning process. These also allow for sites with more flexibility and fewer maintenance demands.
 - g. Picnic pavilions – By including more of these simple features, the park provides a means for visitors to stay longer. Furthermore, these offer an opportunity to generate revenue through rental options. A design competition for the addition of new structures could be pursued to generate interest and link the designs to the island’s rich culture of design.
 - h. Connected experiences between both islands – the two islands are different in most every way, which is both an advantage and disadvantage. We recommend exploring unifying elements to encourage visitors to explore both parks. Opportunities could be explored along the shoreline, lighting displays, or architectural/sculptural features. Alternatively, the islands could be developed to highly contrast each other, so there is the desire to visit each as more distinct, unique experiences.
4. User Experience– we heard your team share their thoughts and concerns numerous times about who is or isn’t visiting the park, how visitors use the park, and the experience provided to each visitor. The success of the master plan will largely be determined by the turnout of visitors and the emotional connections that they come away with from their experiences. The following recommendations may already be a part of your master plan process, but they are worth mentioning because of their inherent value.
- a. Public engagement is an important part of the design process, to build a sense of community awareness, participation, and ownership. Input should be solicited to gain an understanding of city resident and visitor’s perspectives of the current park and their desire for how it could better serve them in the future.

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- b. We believe that the master plan should go further and develop a *Strategic Experience Plan*. This is an opportunity to chart a day at the park from the perspective of different visitors. Leveraging Isabelle's knowledge to identify approximately 10-12 different target users, plans can be created based on the optimal experience for a day in the park. This plan can be used to help identify current strengths and weaknesses in the park that can inform improvements within the master plan. The intent is to ensure a wide range of users (variety of demographics) are getting to the park and staying for longer periods of time. A successful *Strategic Experience Plan* will provide a more equitable, accessible, and happier place. This exercise may inform your team of current features that go away, gain in prominence, or shift the allotment of resources for maintenance.
 - c. When visitors plan their day at the park, they typically chart a course that is focused around at least one park feature. Knowing how they get to the feature and the approximate duration at the feature allows for identifying nearby attractions and amenities that would allow for "zones" to be designed within the park. The zone approach would identify design elements and a language to tie together both complementary and contrasting programs or features nearby. Clear routes, inviting elements, wayfinding and interpretive signage, and groups of basic amenities (restrooms, water fountains, seating, shade, etc.) all contribute to sustaining visitors in the park for longer durations. The blending and transitions between the zones should be part of the comprehensive design.
5. *Operations & Programming*—it was expressed to us that the park currently is not bringing in enough funds to cover all expenses, particularly as it relates to general maintenance, staffing, and event restoration. Some notable revenue generating programs include events, parking, and rental facilities (e.g. pavilions), but many of these are in direct conflict with landscape sustainability and daily visitor experience. We understand that Genevieve Meloche is focusing her efforts on understanding the balance of revenue generation with park improvements and maintenance, and we recommend consideration of seeking additional support and guidance. In understanding the park programming and budgeting and to assist in the development of a strategic plan. One team to consider is Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, who completed a plan for Bryant Park in New York and for Belle Isle in Detroit. An outside perspective may prove valuable to complement the team and bring potentially new ideas to the table.

These capture some of the larger thoughts we came away with, but you can be assured we have numerous other ideas as well. Please let us know if you have any questions or comments. We would be happy to support your internal and consultant team in any way and would love to share ideas on how to restore/re-create/integrate habitat on both islands and in the river.

We look forward to the development of the master plan. Please do not hesitate to contact us and let us know how we can assist in the development of the master plan for the premier Parc Jean-Drapeau.

Sincerely,



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