



BRIEF TO THE PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS
ON HOMELESSNESS AND SOCIAL COHABITATION IN MONTRÉAL
HELD BY THE OFFICE DE CONSULTATION PUBLIQUE DE MONTRÉAL

**TO RESPECT DEMOCRACY AND PROTECT COMMUNITY:
THE CHINATOWN EXPERIENCE**

Submitted in partnership with

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A WORD ON THE THREE ORGANIZATIONS

CRARR is an independent nonprofit advocacy organization created in 1983 with the mandate to combat race and related discrimination, and to promote diversity and civil rights. Each year, CRARR assists an average of 200 individuals and organizations in the Greater Montréal area from different backgrounds that need support in dealing with discrimination based on race, gender, disability and other grounds, as well as violence and other forms of inequality.

The Chinese Association of Montréal is a nonprofit organization created in 1889 with the mandate to ensure the general well-being, rights and interests of the Chinese community of Montréal and Chinatown. It is composed of the oldest family clan associations that first started to settle in Montréal in the late 1800's.

The Montréal Chinatown Economic Development Council was created in 2018. It has the mandate to promote the rights and interests of merchants located in Chinatown. It is supported by more than 40 Chinese- and non-Chinese-owned businesses in the district.

INTRODUCTION: A TIMELY AND NECESSARY PUBLIC CONVERSATION ON DIFFICULT ISSUES

We would like to first congratulate the City of Montréal for addressing the homelessness crisis through the lens of “social cohabitation” because residents, workers, business owners and homeowners – as well as our frontline public security, public transport and street maintenance workers – deserve to be heard on the issues of homelessness and cohabitation that directly impact them.

As residents, citizens, workers, builders, creators, taxpayers, voters and contributors to Montréal's status as a metropolis, and as people who share living space with the critically growing presence of the unhoused in the city, their voices – and our voices – matter.

In the last two years, in order to counter problems associated with the overflow of the unhoused in Chinatown and repeated institutional dismissal of Chinatown's concerns and needs, our three organizations have actively worked to mobilize residents and merchants to sound the alarm on the threat to public security and public health in the area, denounce official laissez-faire attitudes towards crime and disorder, and obtain the deeply appreciated cooperation of the SPVM and the STM, among others, to bring back peace and order in Chinatown.

Our efforts were carried out without support from local elected officials at all three levels of government, despite local calls for attention and assistance, including open and public invitations to the Mayor of the borough, who is also the Mayor of Montréal, to visit Chinatown at night in order to witness the state of danger and disorder affecting residents and merchants.

Our mobilization of local residents and merchants for the shutdown of the Complexe Guy-Favreau shelter, better security and protection for the Chinatown community, the restoration of the attractiveness and cleanliness of the area, and enhanced representativity of local residents and merchants in public decision-making processes, has allowed us to develop unique insight into the problems associated with the situation of homelessness and cohabitation in Montréal, as well as solutions that can help make our district, our downtown and our city into a more inclusive, kinder, fairer and safer city.

Our experience has shown, more than ever, that accountability, democracy, equity, inclusion and security must be the five fundamental elements of public policy to address issues of homelessness and cohabitation. To this end, we will propose recommendations based on these five foundational principles.

Although we focus mainly on Chinatown, we believe that what the Chinatown community has lived through in recent years reflects the experiences in many other neighborhoods and boroughs.

THE CHINATOWN EXPERIENCE WITH HOMELESSNESS

The area known as Chinatown has been expanded in recent years to comprise a geographical area bound by Saint-Dominique and De Bleury from east to west, and Viger and René-Lévesque from north to south. This expansion allows for the added inclusion of major businesses, including hotel establishments, non-Chinese businesses and homeowners to the west side of Chinatown, and more residents to the east side of Chinatown.

This geographical expansion also has led to an increase in the number of residents to at least 2,000 and an increased diversification with more young professionals and homeowners. According to different sources, including the *Rapport de consultation publique, le Quartier chinois*, published by the OCPM in October 2022, approximately 45 to 50% of residents are of Chinese origin.

Many long-standing residents of Chinatown are senior citizens of all ethnocultural backgrounds, including francophone Québécois who choose to live in the area for a variety of reasons, such as the enjoyment of downtown living in close proximity to a vibrant Chinese community and culture. Among the ethnoculturally diverse senior residents, many have physical limitations associated with age or are women living alone. On weekends, several of these senior residents receive visits from family members and friends.

Despite its history and culture as a partially designated heritage district, Chinatown can no longer – and should not – be seen as for members of the Chinese community alone. Montréal Chinatown is, in many ways, a microcosm of modern Montréal, where people of different ethnic and social backgrounds, ages, and languages live together in harmony. Chinatown's richness today is its cultural diversity. It should be seen as a model of *vivre-ensemble par excellence*, and it should serve as an inspiration for other districts and boroughs in multicultural Montréal.

Since the pandemic, Montréal's Chinatown has become the epicenter of the urban crisis that results from poor management by authorities of the homelessness situation, including issues of public safety, public health, social planning, economic development and respect of residents' civil and human rights.

The situation was aggravated by local authorities' unilateral parachuting of a homeless shelter in the Complexe Guy Favreau during the first months of the pandemic in 2020, without prior consultation, information and preparation. Overnight and for the next three years, hundreds of long-standing residents of the dwellings in and around the Complexe Guy Favreau were besieged by the presence of the unhoused, many of whom had serious mental health and drug addiction problems.

Before the opening of the Complexe Guy Favreau shelter, there were three homeless shelters in Chinatown, not to mention a safe injection site on the other side of René-Lévesque. The Complexe Guy Favreau shelter, due to its overflowing capacity, unfortunately transformed Chinatown into an unsafe and unhealthy district.

Since then, many residents (homeowners and tenants alike), workers and businesses (ranging from small Chinese- and non-Chinese-owned businesses to major businesses such as hotel establishments) have experienced incalculable disturbing acts of crime and disorder that directly threaten not only their physical and psychological security, but also their daily living conditions, their property and budgets, and their future prospects.

The damages are not simply material or financial. Many homeowners and small businesses have to spend money to repair broken property, and many more have stopped claiming insurance coverage to avoid hikes in premiums.

The damages are also social, psychological and environmental. For instance, for many residents who had to witness unhoused women, especially Indigenous women, being victims of sexual and physical violence, or unhoused men engaged in violent bloody fights in plain public view, it is a particularly painful experience. The suicide of an unhoused man who jumped from the rooftop of a Chinese restaurant during lunchtime in the summer of 2023, and the recent tragic death of a young unhoused woman in front of the Complexe Guy-Favreau, still remain fresh in many residents' and merchants' memory.

From crack alleys two blocks away from the Montréal Police headquarters, where uncontrolled and unsanctioned drug trafficking became a daily criminal business activity, to restaurants and community centers being constantly vandalized and robbed, and residents and their private homes being the frequent targets of random acts of crime and disorder causing damages to persons and property, Chinatown became, until the summer of 2023, the most visible symbol of urban decay and neglect, next only to the Village and Milton Parc.

The two churches, the local daycare and the seniors' residences in Chinatown were particularly affected by crime and disorder because of the people they serve.

We do not wish to repeat horror stories of:

- senior women afraid to go out in their own neighborhood at sundown;

- daycare children having to face the unhoused openly expose themselves, urinate and defecate in front of them, resulting in daycare children being escorted by the police for their group outings;
- tenants with limited mobility and other special physical needs not being able to move freely because of sidewalks and residential alleys being blocked by the unhoused and their encampments;
- workers being threatened and assaulted when they finished their shifts in the evenings by the unhoused with unpredictable violent behavioural outbursts;
- hotel guests and residents' visitors seeing their cars being broken into and damaged;
- residents being awakened at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning because of uncontrollable yelling and acts of arson outside their homes by the unhoused with serious mental health problems; and
- many home and business owners seeing their property defaced with feces, urine and trash every week.

To quote some street cleaners and public and private security personnel with whom we often speak, Chinatown, and to a certain extent downtown, has become an “open-air public toilet”.

FEELING AND BEING ABANDONED AND DISMISSED

The above description is not an indictment of the unhoused who lack housing and proper treatment, but an indictment of the irresponsible, insensitive and unaccountable public officials at all three levels, who deliberately turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to Chinatown residents, workers, homeowners and merchants, and who allowed broken windows to lead to broken businesses, broken homes and broken peace.

There exists a perception among many Chinatown residents, workers and businesses that they are being dismissed, ignored and patronized by authorities and consultative structures simply because they are of a certain racial or ethnic background, of a certain age, or of a certain social or economic class. There is also a perception that these authorities lack accountability and are soft on crime.

Many members of the Chinatown community of all ethnocultural or socioeconomic backgrounds resent the fact that their neighbourhood, part of which is now a protected heritage site, is treated as a dumping ground or a social experiment and that they have to bear alone, from their own pockets, the burden and costs of poor and irresponsible planning concerning homelessness.

Like most merchants, they are angry at not being consulted, informed, heard and at the table. They are tired of being powerless and having to experience daily the fall-out of bad

decisions made and imposed on them by outsiders who show little concern and respect towards their needs.

There is a real and deep sense of being the victims of a new form of urban colonialism and systemic discrimination in urban planning and resource allocation concocted by out-of-touch bureaucrats, unresponsive politicians and the intellectual elite from other privileged areas.

Many residents, workers, homeowners, visitors and merchants in Chinatown, who have experienced physical and psychological violence committed by unhoused individuals with serious mental health problems, do not report these criminal acts to the police because of insufficient and sometimes ineffective police resources. A community-based solution to encourage crime reporting in Chinatown, Operation Gold Dragon, was set up by CRARR last summer, but fear, lack of trust and lack of faith in an unresponsive justice system still hamper crime reporting.

This has led to the perfect storm of backlash, anger, resentment, compassion fatigue, and, inevitably, vigilante self-defence. Lacking electoral procedures for recall as they exist in many American states and cities (such as California and the cities of Oakland and San Francisco), local residents have no other choice but to resort to polarizing resistance and, inevitably, class-action lawsuits.

For a city administration that prides itself with its brave commitment to ending systemic racism and discrimination at all levels of city activities, we believe that real change must come – and come fast. Structures that are demonstrably ageist, racially and linguistically exclusionary, and dismissive of local residents' participation need to be fundamentally changed. Unilateral and unidirectional decision-making processes must end.

Finally, we must stress the inseparable link between homelessness and loss of economic security and vitality. In the last five years, Chinatown has been deeply and adversely affected by the pandemic and by the overflow of the unhoused population. Small businesses, as well as major businesses such as hotels, banks and the three major complexes (Desjardins, Guy-Favreau and the Congrès de Montréal) know all too well the costs of poorly planned homelessness resource allocation.

Despite a large consensus to the effect that Chinatown's vitality and sustainability depends on new opportunities for business expansion and future investments, we are deeply concerned about the City's recent decision to allocate social housing on Clark Street, in the heart of the business sector of Chinatown. Once again, this decision was imposed without any consultation with existing businesses in the area. We must state categorically that any new services for the unhoused in and surrounding Chinatown are anathema to Chinatown's short and long-term economic security and vitality.

SOLUTIONS AND CALLS TO ACTION

In devising solutions, we believe that it is imperative to put to rest the archaic or nostalgic vision of Chinatown as being a refuge or dumping ground for the marginalized because it

is not. We also need to put to rest the racially, linguistically, socially and economically exclusionary concept of Montréal's Chinatown in all public decision-making.

We need to conceive Chinatown of 2025 and beyond as an integral part of the downtown of a major metropolis, where residents and businesses will thrive, where visitors and tourists will enjoy the finest shopping and entertainment experience, and where history, culture, location and entrepreneurship create strategic opportunities for full participation in the shaping of downtown economic and social dynamism.

We believe that the following recommendations can be useful because they aim to promote better equity, diversity, inclusion and safety for all – in short, a better model of *vivre ensemble* for a district that desperately needs to grow and prosper in full security, harmony, equity, democracy and accountability:

- 1. Apply an equitable rights-based approach and recognize the fundamental rights and freedoms of residents, workers, homeowners and business owners:** we believe that the City of Montréal must respect, implement and enforce its *Charter of Rights and Responsibilities*, and apply in a coherent and consistent manner its plans of action on seniors, Indigenous peoples and people with disabilities as well as its policy against systemic racism and discrimination, among others, in all policy decisions related to homelessness.

The City must pay particular attention to the “other” vulnerable populations in different districts where homelessness resources are considered, namely, residents who are children, women, seniors, and disabled and who will be disproportionately affected by the negative effects of the poorly planned presence of the unhoused.

These vulnerable residents must be spared the fear, the costs and the assault on their freedoms and rights as well as their mental and physical security because of their vulnerable characteristics. Their rights as protected under ss. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 10.1 and 12 of the Québec *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* must be recognized and respected by all decision-makers and service providers.

We also believe that in light of their disproportionate representation among the unhoused population, the unhoused who have mental health needs or drug dependency, as well as those who are Indigenous, receive special attention. We take this position due to our direct experiences with members of these groups in Chinatown.

For cohabitation to exist and thrive, the rights of the unhoused, which need to be protected, cannot be recognized at the expense of those of residents, workers, homeowners and merchants who have to live on a daily basis with them, as this can be the basis for a populist backlash against human rights in general.

We therefore recommend that:

- 1) the City of Montréal integrate its policy on systemic racism and discrimination, as well as its action plans on Indigenous peoples, seniors, and people with disabilities, in all policy-making, programs and services on homelessness;

- 2) all funding for homelessness programs and services require the full recognition and respect of the fundamental rights and freedoms of residents, homeowners, workers and merchants as set out in ss. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 10.1 and 12 of the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*;
- 3) all funding for homelessness programs and services require an impact assessment where the rights of children as recognized by the U.N. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, notably the right to a safe and healthy environment, are concerned;
- 4) in the planning and delivery of homelessness programs and services, service providers pay special attention to the impact on vulnerable groups in the local community, such as children, seniors, women and people with disabilities; and
- 5) adequate funding be granted to programs and services for the unhoused who are Indigenous or who have mental health and drug dependence needs, in order to avoid the disproportionately adverse barriers these groups face, which will in turn affect the local quality of life for all.

2. Require concrete actions on cooperation and security. Cohabitation with the unhoused, similar to cohabitation with any population group that is different from the majority, requires community-based concrete tools and resources for coordination, communication, consultation and cooperation. Vague references to communications, “concertation” and cooperation in documents such as the Montréal Ombudsman’s 2022 report entitled *Ne pas détourner* or the City’s 2024 position paper entitled *Les conditions de succès visant à assurer une intégration harmonieuse des ressources dédiées aux personnes en situation d’itinérance dans les quartiers de la métropole* need to be translated into concrete actions.

We therefore recommend that:

- 6) Funding for homelessness programs and services include a requirement of the creation of a Committee on Cooperation and Security (CCS) with the mandate to ensure the inclusion of local residents, business associations and representatives from local schools, CPE, faith institutions and other public services such as the SPVM and the CLSC. Residents should constitute half of this CCS, and local socio-demographic diversity in terms of race, language, ethnicity, age, class and ability, should be respected;
- 7) As a funding requirement, all service providers must develop and implement an action plan on local community cooperation and security within four months of receiving funding;
- 8) Additional funding representing up to 15% of the regular budget be provided to funding recipients to this specific end; and
- 9) Adequate City funding be made available to residents to create and manage residents’ associations in a sustainable manner, with the view to enhance local democracy and citizen empowerment.

- 3. Ensure better protection and security:** We believe that public security must be considered a top priority in all homelessness programs and services and that adequate resources be provided to ensure better protection and security (including protection for municipal employees, EMMIS staff, and Montréal Centre-Ville workers in their work).

We therefore recommend that:

- 10) Data on the unhoused as victims and suspects be collected and disseminated on an annual basis, with full information on the personal characteristics of victims and suspects, the categories of infractions and locations, etc.;
- 11) Special security considerations be given by public security and public transit services to the Indigenous unhoused and to victims of violence associated with the unhoused who are Indigenous, people with disabilities, immigrants, and women and seniors from ethnocultural communities who cannot communicate in French or English;
- 12) Funding for public security and law enforcement be increased for Chinatown and other areas with the greatest security needs, in order to allow for more preventive police presence, faster police responses and more effective interventions against drug trafficking;
- 13) Community-based crime prevention funding and resources be adequately provided to residents' and merchants' associations in areas with disproportionate needs for protection and security, such as Chinatown;
- 14) Additional funding be made available to homelessness service providers in order to enable them to set up adapted crime prevention and victims' support programs; and
- 15) Additional funding be made available to homelessness service providers in order to enable them to purchase civil liability insurance in case of civil lawsuits filed by residents and merchants against them.

- 4. Efficient and Effective Homelessness Resource Planning Reduces Costs and Increases Economic Vitality:** We believe that small businesses in Chinatown and in every neighborhood in Montréal are very likely to be adversely affected by the presence of the unhoused. Consequently, homelessness resource planning and allocation must take into account impacts on local businesses. It is a matter of reducing and preventing costs caused by vandalism, increased insurance premium, customer and investment avoidance, and business flight, with which Chinatown businesses are too familiar.

We therefore recommend that:

- 16) All homelessness resource planning and allocation decisions in any area with a certain level of economic activity require and be based on a business impact

assessment study to be conducted in close cooperation with local businesses before such decisions are made;

- 17) The City of Montréal set a business compensation fund for small businesses providing retail sales, product rentals, or consumer services that experience a loss of revenues or profits at a percentage and over a period to be determined, and that incur additional expenses associated with the presence of the unhoused or acts committed by the latter; and
- 18) The City of Montréal adopt a moratorium on new homelessness resources, including social housing, in Chinatown, especially where the business sector of Chinatown, such as Clark Street, is concerned.

CONCLUSION

We applaud the City of Montréal for its late openness and attention to the needs, wishes and aspirations of the people of Montréal – residents, workers, merchants and homeowners – who wish to build a city and a common future based on a shared vision, shared values and shared aspirations.

Among these are fairness, compassion, solidarity and humanity. However, security is also becoming a dominant value, concern and reality, be it physical, psychological, economic or social, and it must be considered essential to the social cohesion and economic vitality of Montréal.

We are a caring city and a caring people. We believe that no one is oblivious or indifferent to the growing number of the unhoused in Montréal, and believe that something must be done to alleviate and eliminate, in the short and long terms, this very urgent and grave social challenge. Like child poverty, homelessness is the symptom of a society that lacks strong family values and structures, secure community foundations, social cohesion and economic stability and fairness.

We do not believe that reasonable and ordinary people harbor any ill will towards the unhoused; they simply have had enough of bad decisions about the unhoused made by out-of-touch, insensitive and paternalist civil servants or politicians that do not seem to care about them - “the others” on the other side of the “co” equation.

For far too long, the silent majority has been kept out of decisions on conditions that affect them directly. These OCPM public consultations are expected to capture this silent majority’s concerns, demands, expectations and aspirations and formulate them into calls for change and new ways to help everyone live with one another in full security, respect harmony and equity.

We thank you for this unique opportunity.