

Brief regarding the Special Planning Program for the Quartier des grands jardins

From Robert Hajaly

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I lived in this area for 17 years and still live adjacent to it in the Peter McGill district and work at Dawson College. Consequently I have a strong interest in the future development of the area and have been involved with it through the Peter McGill Community Council. However, the following views are strictly my own.

My general perspective is how to make this area into a real community which will promote its development, given that, in my view, it is not such a community now. It is not such a community partly because of the very heterogeneous character of its population but also because of the lack of public community services which would bring together this population and give it more of a reason to stay here. Hence the very high mobility overall of this population.

By lack of community services I am referring to a lack of a local public school, public library, community centre and sporting facilities. These facilities would have to be centrally located relative to the residential part of the Peter McGill district and capable of serving the whole district. The preliminary version of the Special Planning Program refers to the need to improve community services, including to strengthen the residential character of the neighbourhood. However, it takes no notice of the lack of services I have just mentioned and suggests no remedy for this lack.

The Ville Marie Borough has tried to make up for this lack by providing some services through existing private institutions in the area. However, its efforts in this regard are wholly inadequate. For example, it provides some physical activities through the Collège de Montréal, but only, according to its current program (for winter 2011), on Saturday and Sunday mornings and chiefly for children. And it provides only some swimming through the downtown YMCA during certain restricted hours of the week. Culturally, it gives a small grant to the private Atwater Library, which, though in Westmount, serves mainly people in Ville-Marie. However, this library was considered by Ville-Marie's own civil servants to be inadequate on account of its too small collection of materials, relatively low number of subscribers and peripheral location (report by Michel Demers and Annie Gauthier, Direction de la culture, des sports, des loisirs et du développement social, January 10, 2008). They recommended, however, that the Atwater Library be given an associate status with a local public library, to be created. But such a public library has subsequently not been created.

What I wish to recommend, then, is that the final version of the Special Planning Program takes notice of the lack of a local public school, public library and community centre and recommends their establishment as a matter of priority. Since these institutions would be serving the whole of the Peter McGill district they should be located

centrally relative to the distribution of the residential population of the district. This suggests a location around the intersection of St. Mathieu Street and de Maisonneuve Blvd., which moreover is the densest part of the district and of the Grand Jardins area. It is also the area with the highest proportion of immigrants, who are the least integrated into the area and therefore most in need of the presence of community services.

To be more specific, the Victoria School would be the best site for a local primary school, while the CLSC building, at 1801 de Maisonneuve, would best house a public library, community center, and also a public daycare (the CLSC occupies only 2 of 8 floors in the building). The present proposed use of Victoria School as a tourism school is inappropriate, as this is a residential, not tourist, area; Academie Bourget, on de la Montagne Street below St. Catherine Street downtown, also owned by the CSM and empty, would be more suitable as a tourist school. The important thing, however, is that these services all be located very close to each other, not only because their use is interrelated, but also so as to create a kind of public district centre, now missing, which would draw together different segments of the district's population to interact with each other.

If the Victoria school becomes a public primary school this has a bearing on my next topic, the proposed green space on de Maisonneuve Blvd. between the Victoria School and the Royal Curling Club. I strongly support the creation of this green space, especially if it contains a children's playground, first because there are literally thousands of people living in the high apartment towers facing or near this proposed green space, with no place nearby to escape from their apartments and relax outdoors. And some of these people have young children, who need to be able to run around a bit. Second, locating a green space and playground next to the School and nearby the community centre/public library/day care reinforces the creation of a district centre which draws people together, the equivalent of a village green. And if Victoria School is used as a primary school then the fence separating its grounds now from the existing parking lot could be removed, creating a green space from school wall to curling club wall, which the students of the school could also use as their playground.

I admit there could be a problem of security created by the patrons of the Bar Diana, whose back door gives onto a lane which connects with the present parking lot. The best solution is to build a high gate cutting off this lane from the future green space which could be locked at night when problems are most likely to occur. As for the problem of trucks loading supplies at the back door of the curling club, the best solution is to let the trucks use the lane from St. Mathieu Street which leads to the curling club back door without having to go down the length of the present parking lot.

That leaves over the problem of parking. The parking lot is now well used, even at night (8-10 p.m.) when it can be nearly full with cars (and perhaps some teachers

of the school once it opens will wish to park their cars there also). The only obvious solution is to build an underground garage. If that seems expensive consider this: the Ville-Marie Borough runs 13 sports fields and 24 playgrounds in the eastern part of the borough and recently spent \$15 million to add to these facilities. Therefore the final version of the SPP should propose the suggestions I've just made, including the underground parking lot if necessary.

My next topic is the proposed revitalization of the western part of St. Catherine St. in this area, from Atwater to Fort St. I admit there is a need for revitalization here, but I'm concerned to maintain the present character of the street as the commercial thoroughfare of a residential area, not as the beginning of the metropolitan part of St. Catherine serving the whole of the city or at least of the west end, and pushed forward by big investments. This seems to be favoured by the preliminary version of the SPP, following the view of the Table de Concertation Centre-Ouest. I enjoy the present relaxed and casual ambiance of this portion of St. Catherine, the pedestrian friendly character of its low lying buildings, the sunniness this creates, the way the stores serve chiefly the local residents, and the people I know in them – in a word, a community. I don't want this destroyed, and if I want more excitement I can always walk east past Bishop Street. And I don't think I'm the only resident who feels this way.

Therefore, I want it made clear that the base of any newly constructed high rise buildings should be no more than 3 stories, about 10 metres, not the 16 metres mentioned in the SPP preliminary version, which is about 5 floors. 3 floors is the standard or most typical height along St. Catherine from Atwater to Guy, and the only exception to this rule could be where the neighbouring building is one floor higher, or has a base one floor higher, as happens occasionally. Also high rise buildings should be no higher than 10 floors or about 32 metres, not the proposed 44 m, and they should be set back far enough not to throw shadows on the other side of the street except late in the day – set back at least 10 feet or 3.5 metres. It is not specified in the preliminary SPP that all buildings higher than 3 (or 4) floors must be set back, and by how much. There is only vague talk of 'harmonising' higher buildings with their neighbours, which could be open to any interpretation. And there is no logical need to stick with standard heights of 16 and 44 metres.

Also, it must be stated that buildings having some heritage value cannot be destroyed or else altered in a way that reduces their heritage value; and it must be specified precisely which buildings possess such heritage value for purposes of this provision. If not, the owners of these buildings may put off restoring them where necessary or letting them in the hope of selling or tearing them down to put up a higher building. I suggest specifically that the Victorian greystone buildings on the south side east of Cabot Square from 2170 to 2196 St. Catherine, and the attractive art deco building on the north side from 2077 to 2101 St. Catherine, be explicitly protected from any destruction or alteration reducing their heritage value, and that should be specified in the final version of

the SPP. Also the Pepsi Forum should be so protected on account of its historical significance and present cultural vocation (it's the main source of English movies in the city) while the city should use its commercial subsidy program to help the Forum develop more of its vacant storefront sites on both St. Catherine and Atwater.

One last matter I wish to address concerning the revitalization of St. Catherine is the proposed increase in the number of terraces on St. Catherine favoured by the SPP. It notes that this can create "nuisances" for residents living on St. Catherine, bearing in mind that the SPP also wants residential densification on the street. In my view I believe these developments may be compatible if the terraces in question are those of restaurants and coffee shops, are limited in size and aren't used much beyond midnight. But terraces are not so compatible if they are those of bars (including those that serve food but have a license to serve alcoholic drinks without food) open to 3 a.m. at night. Such terraces, if right under people's apartments and bedrooms, will create a difficult noise problem for residents; and I am not satisfied with the answer, given during the information sessions, that the city will talk with proprietors about this problem – I do not believe that this will generally provide an acceptable situation. Therefore such bar terraces should be forbidden in this part of St. Catherine if there are residences above them. And all terraces, including of restaurants and coffee shops, should be placed right next to the wall of the building containing the establishment owning the terrace, not on the part of the sidewalk near the road, creating a kind of gauntlet between the terrace and the building that pedestrians must pass through, as happens now with two bar terraces.

Turning now to the improvement of Cabot Square, I strongly support its expansion eastward as proposed by the SPP, especially if this is to be used to accommodate a stage for community and cultural events. I also think that there should be additional access to the Square via openings in the rail surrounding the Square in the middle of the south and east sides of the Square, where the rail now has no openings; and paths from these openings should go to the statue in the middle of the Square, so that the paths, taken together, including the existing paths, create a pattern like the British Union Jack flag.

The SPP refers to the use of resurfacing materials. This is important for the paths so that they do not become muddy when it rains, as happens now in places, so these materials should be very durable. But the space between the paths should remain grassed, and it is necessary to upgrade this grass cover in the spring of each year since the grass wears away, leaving large bare patches of earth which become muddy when it rains, as happens now. Also, much more flowers should be placed in the Square, along the outer rail, around the statue in the middle and selected trees, particularly those behind the Metro station structure, and around this structure and the Vespesienne. And these flowers should be properly maintained each summer season.

The marginal people who now use this Square should not be chased away

from it but rather be actively offered rehabilitation services, jobs that they can do, and suitable housing. All this requires considerable money and the commitment of all levels of government but it will pay many dividends in the end, not only for the marginal people but also for the whole community and the city in terms of encouraging development in this area. The SPP should strongly support this.

I turn now to the development of the area south of Cabot Square. I agree with the SPP that this should be developed residentially. In particular once the Children's Hospital leaves its premises the buildings should be zoned only residential by the city, unless the McGill hospital network wishes to retain the building for a medical or other institutional purpose. In particular, it should not be allowed to become business offices, as there are many office sites now going begging in the business core downtown and they should be developed first for offices. I do not believe the SPP is explicit about this future use of the Children's Hospital but it should be.

I do not agree with the SPP's proposed creation of the Jardin de l'Hôpital just south of Cabot Square, or with the erection of two high rise residential towers south of the Jardin along René-Lévesque Blvd., nor with the residential development of the Franciscan site. The development of the Jardin contradicts the SPP's view that Cabot Square should be surrounded by high class residences and is pointless, especially if Cabot Square is to be enlarged and improved and Parc Hector Toe Blake is to be developed as a children's playground. As for the two residential towers they would throw a long shadow across this playground and they contradict the SPP's valid recommendation that a variety of housing be provided in the area to different clienteles, in particular for families. As it is now, all the proposed residential development is of high rise apartments, including those on St. Catherine Street, and many families with young children do not wish to live in such apartments (recognizing this, the Seville project has not offered a single 3-bedroom family apartment in its first two phases).

Therefore what I recommend for the area south of Tupper Street is this: First, Lambert Closse should be redirected to connect with Lambert-Closse south of René-Lévesque, passing right in front of the present emergency (east) wing of the Children's Hospital. This will allow better access to the residential enclave south of René-Lévesque, which is now somewhat cut off from the area north of René-Lévesque. At the very least there should be a pedestrian and cycling path along this route, if not one for cars. Second, the area bounded by this new Lambert-Closse, Sussex St., Tupper and René-Lévesque should be developed for townhouse, duplex and triplex housing. These residences would each have access to a small private garden at their back, and these private gardens would give onto a private common garden enclosed by the residences in this block. These residences would be directed at attracting families to the area, who provide greater stability and a greater demand for local community services, improving the quality of the area.

Families would be attracted also by the adjacent development of Hector Toe

Blake Park as a children's playground, while the Franciscans' site, diagonally across from this Park, should be developed as a mini soccer field (Parc des Franciscains). As noted above there are no public sports facilities in the whole Grand Jardins area so the creation of such a soccer field would be highly justified, even if attracting families were not a motive. In terms of maximising green space this soccer field would make up for the loss of the Jardin de L'Hôpital, but unlike the Jardin it would serve a specific useful purpose. And, finally, compensating for the loss of the high towers, apartment towers could be built in the parking lot of the former Convent of the Petites Soeurs des Pauvres further east on the south side of René-Lévesque (as Groupe Pacific were going to do before the recent recession).

I now turn to the residential development of the Grand Jardins area generally, and I would extend this to the areas immediately east of the Grand Jardin limits, where there are more parking lots that could be developed, until you get to the built-up business core. The SPP notes that only 8% of the residents of the area are owners, and since owners are more committed to the quality of the area where they live since the value of their property is influenced by it, and they are generally more stable than renters, it's clear this figure ought to be increased. On the other hand, since 73% have incomes less than \$40,000 annually and 29% less than \$10,000, it's also clear that more affordable housing is necessary, whether owned or rental.

In this regard the SPP is right to note that the city's housing programs are ill-suited to stimulating or creating housing in the area and that these programs ought to be better adapted, but here I thought the SPP should have been more specific in its recommendations. One example is the Habitat Montréal subsidy program to retain families in Montreal. This offers a subsidy of \$10,000 plus a refund of the real estate transfer tax to families buying a condo no more than \$265,000, including tax, or \$310,000 for a 3-bedroom unit. But even, for example, a small 2-bedroom unit of 840 ft² in the Seville project costs over \$350,000 with tax, while no 3-bedroom units have been offered so far. Thus the eligible condo prices to receive a subsidy need to be increased substantially for this area to motivate the building and buying of condos here, and the SPP should be more clear and specific about this. So also for residential developments to qualify for the city's Accès Condo program, which allows for a public subsidy of 10% on the price of a condo and which may be combined with the Habitat Montréal subsidy for a substantial saving.

As for low cost rental housing we saw during the March 29 information session that virtually all public low income units in Ville-Marie Borough are in the eastern part of the Borough. Only one habitation with 86 apartments, 80 for old people, exists in the western part of Ville-Marie, out of a total of 2129 apartments in about 60 habitations in the whole borough. A residential development fund was suggested by the SPP to finance the higher land cost in the centre west. I would say the particular means is not that important; what matters is the financial commitment of all the levels of government to deal with this problem, and that's what the SPP should emphasise, together with the precise extent of

the problem.

I turn now to the upkeep of existing residential buildings. The SPP notes that some of the residential towers built in the 60's and 70's are showing signs of deterioration, and it speaks of inciting proprietors to use public subsidy programs to renovate their properties. In my view the properties most in need of such improvement, at least in terms of their external appearance, are some of the older lower rise residential apartments built earlier in the last century. I'm thinking in particular of some of the buildings along de Maisonneuve on the north side between Chomedey and Fort Streets, specifically 2069-2087 de Maisonneuve, whose walls are markedly dirty, their gardens bare earth, and in some cases their light fixtures are missing.

Other buildings, for example at 1935, 1939 and 1947 de Maisonneuve, have garbage strewn all over their front lots. Buildings at 1421 Mackay Street, at the southwest corner of Lambert-Closse and Lincoln and at the northwest corner of Fort and St. Catherine are boarded up (in the latter case, on the 2nd and 3rd floors) and graffiti covered. The appearance of all these buildings brings down the level of the whole surrounding area and makes it less attractive to live there. The SPP speaks of more inspections to remedy this. However, I don't think the cleanliness problems are covered by either the building codes or cleanliness by-law, but they ought to be covered by the latter which should be better enforced. And the SPP doesn't make clear what can be done with unresponsive landlords. The city, in my view, should have and exercise powers, if necessary, to itself clean up and repair buildings that need it, charging proprietors for the service, and to take over and convert boarded up buildings into low cost housing; and the SPP should support this.

I now wish to make remarks on a few miscellaneous proposals of the SPP. First, I support the preservation of institutional buildings and gardens and the city negotiating agreements to give people access to these gardens, provided this is compatible with the function, for example, educational, of the institution. In particular there could be a young children's playground in the back of the Grey Nuns' grounds to serve the eastern part of Shaughnessy Village, just as there is such a playground now on the grounds of Dawson College. There should be signs making clear this public access, within what hours, etc.

I support strongly the greening of Guy Street from René-Lévesque to Sherbrooke, but also the widening of its sidewalks, including to accommodate a few benches, and especially from de Maisonneuve to Sherbrooke, where the pedestrian traffic from Concordia to the buses on Sherbrooke can be considerable. However, this greening should be extended all the way up Cote des Neiges to where it meets the mountain at Cedar Avenue. I also strongly support the greening of Lambert-Closse from de Maisonneuve to St. Catherine to relieve the blank expanse of the back of the Forum. As for

the greening of the lane on the east side of the Victoria School, this must allow the passage of vehicles existing from the garage at the back of the large apartment building on St. Mathieu Street as well as the vehicles supplying stores on St. Matheu and St. Catherine just west of St. Mathieu. The first requirement here is in fact to clean the lane, which is strewn with garbage from all these buildings, and to enforce the cleanliness by-law, which is poorly enforced here.

I am against the building of a tramway along Guy street below Sherbrooke Street referred to favourably by the SPP several times. If the sidewalks on Guy Street are widened on both sides of the street, as I've just recommended, that will leave the road just 4 lanes wide. If two lanes are used for parking that will leave just two lanes for traffic. That means that when the tram trains are stopped in the middle of the road to pick up passengers no cars will be able to pass, and also to allow people to get to the trams in the middle of the road. By contrast, buses, by going to the side of the road to pick up passengers, allow cars to pass. Also trams require poles and overhead wires which will create a visual interference in the area, and they are expensive. This money is needed, and would be better spent, on all the other improvements necessary in this area, which I've discussed above. Finally, the alternative of switching over to electric buses as existing buses are replaced, together with air conditioning on the buses for the summer, would more cheaply attract passengers. The SPP should accordingly promote or suggest this option instead of the tramway.

Finally, frequent reference is made by the SPP to promoting views of the city to the south and the river from the falaise St. Jacques at the southern border of the Grand Jardins area. In fact, given the amount of noise coming from the passing commuter trains, whose number will substantially increase in the future, and from the Ville Marie expressway, this is not a good idea where there are residences. What is needed, rather, is a sound buffer from trees and high bushes to mask this noise. The exception would be the view from the CCA gardens and from the south end of the mini soccer field I've suggested on the former Franciscan grounds -- another reason for this soccer field.

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