

**URBAN AGRICULTURE AND QUALITY OF LIFE**

**BRIEF originally presented to the Village of Senneville**

**by the SENNEVILLE AGRICULTURAL GROUP,**

**modified for the PMAD hearings in 2011**

**and for the URBAN AGRICULTURE hearings.**

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### ***The Senneville Agriculture Group***

In 2008 and in 2009, conferences on urban and peri-urban agriculture took place at Macdonald College. As well as several owners of agricultural land in Senneville, the mayor and most of the Village councillors attended. Subsequent to that conference, the Senneville Agriculture Group was formed with the objective of ensuring the long term conservation of agricultural land and natural spaces in the Village of Senneville, and the promotion of agriculture in harmony with village life.

The Senneville Agricultural group is working to ensure that arable land is farmed and not left uncultivated, because the perception prevails that unused farmland is “vacant” and should be built over, and because farming, as stated, has intrinsic value to a community. To this end, we have enlisted partners such as McGill University’s Macdonald College and experts from the Université de Montréal.

The Senneville Agricultural Group has as its goal the preservation of Senneville’s agricultural and natural heritage as well as the architectural elements associated with it; we are especially interested in the multiple contributions agriculture makes to our community. We also hope that Senneville can serve as a pilot project of how multifunctional, low-impact agriculture contributes to the above-stated objectives and present a model of sustainable development for other communities.

The Senneville Agricultural Group includes: Alison Hackney, Liz Morgan, Joyce Jennings, Chris Larnder, Ramzy Kassouf, Jeremy Guth, Gordon Erskine, Stephen Homer, and Paul Meldrum.

Were also consulted: Christopher Bryant (U of M, D3T), Joel Bonin (NCC), Ghaliya Chahine (U of M, labo D3T).

## **PREAMBLE**

The Senneville Agricultural Group requests that the Ville de Montreal make protection of ALL agricultural land a top priority. Without secured agricultural land, there can be no agricultural activity, hence no viable local food system. We ask you to remember that less than three percent of Quebec's territory is suitable for agriculture, and even less of that is excellent. This means that if residential development is allowed on the best land, agricultural production will decline because sufficient yields cannot be sustained on inferior farmland, even if production efforts are increased.

The mix of woodland and farmland which characterises Senneville is an example of a community enhanced by having a mosaic of agricultural, natural, and residential areas. The Brundtland Report (see: Oxford University Press, 1987) outlined one of the most widely agreed upon definitions of sustainable development: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1983).

Agriculture in Montreal area has an essential and strategic role for the many services it provides. Of course it is fundamental to local, "short-circuit" food systems, the very basis of food security. But agriculture does much more than that; it is multi-functional, providing improved quality of life and landscape, tourism and recreation opportunities, as well as protected wildlife habitat (*the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal* is in the most biodiversity-rich part of Quebec and a buffer between residential areas and natural spaces. The very fact of being part of Montreal Island makes all of this possible; distant rural farms do not have these opportunities or these roles to anywhere near the same extent. A mosaic of farms and natural spaces makes for a quality of life which is the hallmark of the world's finest cities; for a discussion of the benefits of peri-urban

agriculture; see the extensive work of Professor Christopher Bryant of the *Laboratoire de Développement durable et dynamique territoriale (D3T)* of the *Université de Montréal*.

## **THE CURRENT STATE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND IN AND AROUND MONTREAL**

### ***Very little agricultural land available for individual farms***

5.6% of the surface area of Montreal is presently zoned agricultural and is protected by the LPTAA (LRQ 41-1) (*Loi sur la protection du territoire et des activités agricoles*), under the jurisdiction of the CPTAQ (*Commission de la protection du territoire agricole du Québec*). **Montreal itself has only 2 067 ha of protected agricultural lands, 1 051.61 ha of which is situated on Ile Bizard.**

An agricultural zone is not exclusively occupied by farms; many other uses exist within its limits. In Montreal's West Island, for example, agriculture, education, residences, golf courses and conservation areas have always shared the land. In fact, most of the agricultural zone in Ste-Anne and Senneville is occupied by the McGill-Macdonald Campus (205ha), the Morgan Arboretum (245ha), the Bois-de-la-Roche farmland (191ha) and Braeside golf course (21 ha). In other words, more than 662 ha of the agricultural land (i.e. 67% of the Island of Montreal Ag zone) are not actually available for *individual* farms run by private entrepreneurs.

### ***Continuous pressure strains agriculture's vitality***

Loss of high-quality agricultural land to residential development, transport systems, and industry is a serious problem worldwide. Requests to exclude land from the Agricultural Zone places enormous pressure on the vitality and the development of farming in Montreal. Between 2008 and 2010, the CPTAQ had to deal with 92 exclusion requests on 1245 ha of prime agricultural land in and around the greater Montreal area (Montreal,

Laval, Lanaudière, Laurentides and Monteregie regions). The loss tally for those two years alone was 469 ha.

### ***A growing interest in and demand for locally grown food***

In Quebec consumer interest in local and organic food has mirrored the North American trend. The number of CSA farm operations (*Community Supported Agriculture*) is growing fast in Quebec. In 2009, Équiterre alone coordinated a network of more than 114 farms that reaches more than 32 000 people in 13 regions<sup>1</sup>. Many of the farms in the Montreal area, including three in Senneville, one in Pierrefonds, and at least two on Ile-Bizard, are involved in this movement. MAPAQ itself is now directly encouraging the establishment of a strong local food system. In 2009, MAPAQ put together the “*Diversification et commercialisation en circuit court en région*” program which aims at promoting diversity in agriculture (types of farms and products) and local food systems (shorter linkages between consumers and food production).<sup>2</sup> More than 315 projects were approved last year for a total of 7.4 million dollars in government support. Organic farms co-exist relatively easily with nearby residential areas.

It is estimated that most market garden farms in Quebec (*marâchers*) are to be found within a 100km radius of Montreal (*Fédération des producteurs marâchers, 2005*). About 514 metropolitan farms exclusively specialize in market fresh produce and occupy about 10.5% of the farmed agricultural zone in the MMC (*Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec, 2004, p.7*).

Farmers' markets are springing up in various boroughs of Montreal and in smaller communities on and off the island of Montreal. Examples are *L'Autre Marché* in Repentigny, Rosemère, Chateauguay, Angus Yards in Montreal North, Rigaud, Hudson

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<sup>1</sup> Équiterre .*Rapport annuel*. 2009

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.mapaq.gouv.qc.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/Formulaires/Diversification\\_commercialisation\\_circuit\\_court.pdf](http://www.mapaq.gouv.qc.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/Formulaires/Diversification_commercialisation_circuit_court.pdf)

and Île Perrot. Farmers in Senneville were instrumental in founding the very successful farmers' market in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue.

**At the same time as communities are seeking more local and organic food through retail and farm market outlets, retailers in the organic produce and health food sector are constantly complaining they cannot source enough local organic products** for their shelves and they report that customers are willing to choose local over Californian products – even at a price premium. Numerous *marchés saisonniers* that wish to establish themselves in new locations have found they **cannot find enough producers to occupy the stalls**. There is an opportunity for farmers in the *Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal*, where demand for local organic produce is high even on the Island of Montreal itself. Why aren't more farmers taking advantage of this opportunity?

***Montreal agricultural lands are at the heart of food quality and food security***

For it to be possible for farmers practicing a low impact type of agriculture which will provide the local organic food which, as we have just seen, is in high demand, they must have secure, long-term access to farmland. It must be possible to farm long enough to get a return on their investment in equipment and land purchase or rental. Additional land use policies are needed with a firm commitment to preserve the best farmland for the long term – not just until the city has crept up to the edge of the fields and the land can be sold for a huge profit and turned into housing tracts. Land use policies must be coupled with policies specifically aimed at revitalizing and enhancing local agricultural activities and projects within Montreal.

It is clear that as peak oil (the point at which easily accessible crude oil diminishes significantly) approaches and transport costs rise, we will become more reliant on locally produced food. Although it is relatively easy and cheap now to truck in food from far

away, this may not always be the case. It is critical for us to protect our best agricultural lands for our own food security.

Low-impact agriculture, typified by small scale organic farming, is perfectly suited to the peri-urban setting; and its important contribution to community life must be recognized and supported.

## **FARMING IN SENNEVILLE**

The farms and farmland of present day Senneville are a blend of pastoral agrarian fallow and modern organic renewal, being farmed by a wave of individuals whose energetic vision is to renew the productivity of Senneville's rich soils. Most farms in Senneville are organic; all are close to the *Forêt de Senneville* (as it is called in Montréal's *Politique de protection et mise en valeur des milieux naturels*) and thus part of a mosaic of fields, hedgerows, and woods. The soil and climate of the west end of Montreal Island is excellent for growing a variety of crops. The soils are varied but there is a good supply of Class 3 soil, St. Bernard loam, some of the best agricultural soils in Quebec. The western tip of the island is also blessed with a microclimate created by the confluence of the Lake of Two Mountains and Lake St Louis, making our growing season (from after the last spring frost) longer than off-island areas.

A large part of Senneville (about 560 ha) is in a federal Migratory Bird Sanctuary established in 1936. In the early 2000's a National Historic District was decreed which includes all of the Village of Senneville from Highway 40 north to Anse-à-l'Orme Road. Parks Canada recognized the extraordinary significance of the buildings and intact landscape (see Commemorative Integrity Statement, available at the Village of Senneville town hall).

The several farms in Senneville have an important vocational mission as well as producing food. At least one new farm, the award-winning Ferme Tournesol in Les

Cèdres, was founded by former agriculture students from nearby Macdonald College who learned from Senneville farmers. A new farm run by McGill students has recently been started in Senneville on land owned by the university. Besides student employees, children and adults who visit to buy or to help out with farm work learn about agricultural systems as well as enjoying a healthy and rewarding activity.

In our view, community, farming and conservation intersect and support each other. Farms within the municipality make an important contribution to the residents' quality of life. In Senneville, farmland provides important wildlife habitat (for example, for White-tailed Deer and predatory birds), but is also a buffer between residential areas and forests. Vegetative cover and forest ensure the quality of air.

Besides being a source of fresh local food, farms provide recreational and educational opportunities, and a sense of connection to where one's food comes from.

Farms contribute to the quality of landscape, and increase the value of neighbouring residential properties: a property surrounded by a rural landscape is more attractive and worth more than one in the midst of a housing tract.

A community which maintains its farmland safeguards its long term resilience and maintains options for the future.

**We urge the city of Montreal to enhance the contribution of working farms, especially the type of relatively non-mechanized farms found in Senneville, to the municipality's quality of life. Indeed, this is central to the whole idea of multifunctionality endorsed by the *Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec (MAPAQ)* and *Solidarité Rurale du Québec*. We would even go so far as to say that Senneville is an example that we hope other municipalities would emulate.**

## **Parc agricole du Bois-de-la-Roche**

The largest tract of contiguous farmland existing in Senneville today is what is now known as the *Parc Agricole Bois-de-la-Roche*, a 191-ha farm purchased in 1880 by Senator Louis Forget. Several farm buildings (some dating back to 1826) were built by the famous Maxwell brothers. They include several stone houses, a large horse stable and dairy barn, and a large underground vegetable earth cellar. Senator Forget's grandson, Louis Johnson, was well-known for his prize-winning Black Angus cattle. In 1991, Bois-de-la-Roche was purchased by the *Communauté urbaine de Montréal* with the proviso that it function as a *Parc agricole*: a living demonstration farm, and not be developed for housing. The City plan for that property has been repeatedly shelved for lack of money and the fields have lain fallow for nearly 20 years. Recently, Corporation D-Trois Pierres, the group that manages the farm in the Cap St. Jacques Nature Park, has been mandated by the City of Montreal to perform some field drainage and field restoration in the eastern-most sector of Bois-de-la-Roche. Despite the fact that Bois-de-la-Roche has not been an operating farm for a long time, its buildings and the sheer mass of its pastoral landscape provide a dominating "agricultural feeling" to the Senneville area.

**It is the hope of the Senneville Agricultural Group that Bois-de-La-Roche may soon again be a working farm, providing fresh produce and educational and recreational opportunities for *all* Montrealers, as well an incubator for other farming projects.**

## **CONCLUSION**

Farming is part of the heritage of Senneville and this is very unique in the Montreal region. The Planning Program is an amazing opportunity for Council to position Senneville as an organic and low impact farming municipality. Although we know that Senneville can only harbour small scale farming, this type of farming can however constitute an important local asset. Networks of locally grown fresh and healthy foods are emerging everywhere in North America. Senneville has an agricultural legacy that definitely needs to be revived and adapted to today's standards of cohabitation, noise management, local traffic, and land conservation...

**The multiple benefits of low-impact agriculture in the peri-urban zone include food security, cultural heritage, wildlife habitat, pleasant landscape, increased property values, an antidote to urban heat islands, and recreational and educational opportunities.**

**The Senneville Agriculture Group respectfully requests that Montreal :**

- ❖ Support the development of Bois-de-la-Roche as a productive farm and an educational site for all Montrealers**
- ❖ Protect agricultural activities within MONTREAL**

**The City of Montreal policy should have direct action plans to enhance, encourage and support local agricultural activities as well as preserving the irreplaceable resource of good farmland. Both of these are necessary to maintain a secure local food system, a key element of sustainability.**