

**Brief re the OCPM Consultation publique sur la strategie centre-ville, from Robert Hajaly**  
**Nov. 2, 2016**

Good evening; my name is Robert Hajaly, and I am a resident of the western part of downtown Montreal. In general I support the city of Montreal's proposed downtown strategy, but I wish to emphasise and add some specific points to this strategy, as well as differ with a few of its points.

**1. Community facilities in western downtown**

There is a great need for public community facilities in western downtown: a public elementary school, community centre, local public library, green recreational spaces and other facilities. In particular, I believe local elected officials, including Denis Coderre as mayor of Ville-Marie borough, should take a greater responsibility in getting the local school boards to establish a public elementary school in western downtown. This school should be used by both the English and French school boards, like FACE school on University Street, so that all elementary school students residing in this area can attend this school. The school should be located in a central location for western downtown, preferably in the former Victoria school on de Maisonneuve Boulevard; the hotel/tourism school now located there should be transferred to the former Academie Bourget on de la Montagne Street. The former Children's Hospital should be redeveloped to include a local community centre, public library and green recreational spaces. The Ville-Marie borough should also negotiate public access to institutional green spaces in this area, such as those of the Sulpicians and the former Grey Nuns, and create an additional green space between the former Victoria school and the curling club immediately west of the school on de Maisonneuve. As well, the redeveloped Rutherford Park, containing the only full sized soccer/football field in western downtown, should be accessible to local residents at all times, rather than being reserved exclusively for the use of McGill University for half the time, as it is now--McGill already has four other full size fields exclusively for its own use. And the outdoor swimming pool in the former Royal Victoria Hospital site should be purchased by the city and made available to local residents; there is no other public outdoor pool available in western downtown at present.

**2. Social and affordable housing, especially for families**

There is a severe lack of social and of affordable owner occupied housing, especially for families, in the western part of downtown. To address this, the city government should make mandatory--it is not now--the rule that large private apartment projects provide 15% of their units as social housing and 15% as affordable owner occupied housing, half of which should be family units. Alternatively, a sum of money equivalent to the cost of building the 15% social housing should be donated to the city to be used exclusively for building social housing **in the same area as the large apartment project--there is no such requirement now**. Whoever redevelops the former Children's, Royal Victoria, Hotel Dieu and Chest Hospitals should also all be required to provide social and affordable housing, each occupying at least 15% of the institutions's total floor space. The cost limits for affordable owner occupied units, particularly for families, to be eligible for city subsidies for such housing should be raised for units built downtown to reflect the greater costs of building units there, particularly in the western part of downtown. Currently, almost no such units built downtown qualify for such subsidies.

**3. Improving public access to downtown and reducing traffic congestion, pollution and noise there**

The following measures are required to improve public access to downtown, and reduce traffic congestion, pollution and noise there. First, building a commuter train line from Brossard to Central Station, and an additional train line, dedicated exclusively to passenger traffic, from the West Island to Central station alongside the existing CN rail line to the West Island. The proposed REM lines to the West Island, airport, and Deux Montagnes, supported by the city in its downtown strategy, are **NOT** the best way to serve the West Island and airport. Their route to the West Island and airport is too circuitous and lengthy, with too many stops; they are too expensive, taking money away from other needed improvements of the public transit system; they would harm the existing commuter rail line to the West Island and off island suburbs

further west; and would cause unnecessary environmental damage. All this in contrast with an additional dedicated passenger line alongside the existing CN line to the West Island, which would not have these faults.

Second, creating a fully integrated and fluid rail-metro-bus-road transport system, first, by connecting the Deux Montagnes rail line to the Green metro line at its McGill metro stop and to the Blue metro line at its Edouard-Montpetit stop; second, by extending the Orange metro line from its present Cote-Vertu terminus to connect up with the Deux Montagnes rail line at its Bois-Franc stop, right next to the Laurentian Boulevard (route 117) bringing cars from the north; third, by extending the Blue metro line eastward from its current Saint-Michel terminus to Pie-IX Boulevard, where it would connect with the proposed bus rapid transit line going along Pie-IX from Laval to the Green metro line stop at Pie-IX--any further extension of the Blue line would be for later; fourth, by connecting my proposed dedicated passenger rail line, going from Central Station to the West Island alongside the existing CN rail line, to the Orange metro line at the Orange line's Place St-Henri stop, and moving the existing Lachine stop of this rail line to be alongside Autoroute 13 coming from the north and connecting this rail stop by bus with 32nd Avenue in the middle of Lachine--the existing rail stop is at the far western end of Lachine. A single fare system should apply to rail, metro and bus.

Third, since some people will still, despite this improved public transit system, wish to use their cars to get downtown, two road improvements are necessary to relieve present congestion: First, widening Notre-Dame Street East between Autoroute 25 in the east and the eastern end of the Ville-Marie Autoroute; and, second, connecting the northern and southern portions of Cavendish Boulevard in the west to relieve pressure on the Decarie Autoroute. Money for all these improvements above should be obtained from all levels of government.

Finally, to reduce traffic pollution and noise downtown I support the electrification, as soon as possible, of municipal buses, taxis, carsharing and municipal vehicles, and the creation of electricity charging stations for these and private vehicles; and also the connecting up of bicycle paths downtown to create a continuous network.

#### **4. Boosting Montreal's downtown economy and built environment**

I find that the city's downtown strategy lacks enough specific ideas for boosting the downtown economy, so here are some specific suggestions: First, **maritime**: Further improve facilities for ship cruise tourism to Montreal and for boating marinas in the Old Port. Deepen the St. Lawrence river channel and the depth, width and length of Montreal port docks to admit larger size 'Panamax' cargo ships (the largest which can go through the Panama Canal), which are now standard in world shipping, to Montreal's port. Working with the federal government will be necessary here. **Finance**: Working with the Montreal Exchange, establish, first, a venture stock exchange, preferably as part of the TSX Venture Exchange, to finance companies, especially tech companies, beyond their startup phase until they are large enough to qualify for the senior S&P/TSX exchange; second, establish exchanges for securitised loans and credit default swaps, insuring loans against default, to better finance loans and promote investment, the quality of the loans being determined and guaranteed by the Montreal Exchange. **Fashion**: Restore and increase state funding for the Montreal Fashion Week directed at commercial buyers, with more money to bring in foreign fashion buyers and journalists; and also help finance fashion show tours of local fashion designers in foreign fashion capitals. Bring in fashion designers from Italy (the largest world exporter of fashion after China) to improve our fashion industry. **Technology**: Create an internet listing of university and research institute technology researchers, technology venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, organised according to their field of technology interest (e.g., biotechnology, information technology, etc.), to facilitate exchanges and cooperation between them leading to new or enhanced enterprises. Organise conference meetings along these lines as well. This can be done with the assistance of the technology organisation in Notman House, with government funding to help.

I support the possibility, suggested in the city's downtown strategy, of fining the owners of persistently vacant or rundown commercial buildings in the downtown areas, and providing incentives for the renovation of these buildings. The fact is that there are quite a few of such persistently vacant buildings throughout the downtown, with no visible attempt being made to fix up and/or rent out these buildings, and this does reduce the overall vitality of downtown. However, I would say that the first step would be to locate and contact the owners of these buildings to see if they can be motivated to fix and/or rent out these buildings, before any fines or coercive measures are applied. Also, there are persistently vacant lots, often in very central locations, on which commercial or residential buildings could be built, and again I think the city should contact the owners of these lots to see if they have any plans or can be motivated to build something on them, or else to sell these lots to a developer who will build something on them. Of course, market demand has also got to be taken into account in considering the use of these lots. The important thing, however, is that the city has to take a more active approach to developing vacant lots and buildings. And one final point I would like to add, not mentioned in the city's downtown strategy, is that there are quite often failed development projects downtown, which despite being approved by the city government and publicly promoted, don't get built, often with damaging effects on the local environment. In these cases the city should investigate why these projects were not built, and see if anything can be done to get them built--again, a more active approach being necessary on the part of the city.

## **5. Local infrastructure improvements**

I strongly support the proposal in the city's downtown strategy to cover the Ville-Marie Autoroute east of the Palais des Congres. The Autoroute and its trench in this area somewhat cut off Old Montreal from the rest of the city, and create a physical and psychological gap between the two; and the Autoroute and trench are noisy and somewhat ugly. One consequence of this, I believe, is to discourage real estate development bordering the Autoroute in this area. In particular, there are many vacant lots, some used for parking, on the north side of the Autoroute between l'Hotel-de-Ville Avenue and St-Laurent Boulevard. Therefore, the first part of the Autoroute to be covered should be between Gosford/Sanguinet Street and l'Hotel-de-Ville Avenue, to allow a pleasant and secure passage from the Champ-de-Mars metro station to the City Hall and Old Montreal; then from l'Hotel-de-Ville to St. Laurent Boulevard, to encourage real estate development along this stretch; then from St-Laurent to St-Urbain Street, to create a more pleasant passage from the Place-d'Armes metro stop at St-Urbain to Old Montreal. In the east, the western part of Place Viger now covering the Ville-Marie Autoroute between St-Denis and Berri Streets should be redeveloped to be more attractive to neighbouring residents and workers, while Place Viger should be extended in the east by further covering the Autoroute at least from St-Andre Street to Amherst Street. This will also promote real estate development in what is potentially a nice area, if the Autoroute were properly covered up here.

In the western downtown, around the Central Station and Lucien L'Allier railway terminals, it is necessary to make sure that all tunnels under railway bridges of the CN and CP lines be kept clean, well lit and painted a light colour (or, if their walls are made of stone, the stone should be kept clean) so that these tunnels feel more secure and pleasant for pedestrians and cyclists going through them. This not only creates a more pleasant environment but also encourages public mobility. Also, publicly accessible parks or green spaces should be planned around the on/off ramps of the Ville-Marie Autoroute in this area. Finally, one personal suggestion of mine not found in the city's downtown strategy: If commuter rail lines are to be built from Central Station to the Airport and West Island, preferably as I have suggested above, and also to Brossard, in addition to the lines already using Central Station, then this station will become relatively more important for Montrealers and visitors alike. Yet now, the approach to this station from De La Gauchetiere Street is alongside or through an indoor parking lot--hardly an imposing experience of the entry to or exit from a major city. Therefore some thought should be given to reconfiguring the approach to this station so that the experience of entering or exiting Montreal downtown is both more imposing and memorable.

## **6. St. Catherine and Sherbrooke Streets downtown**

The city's downtown strategy suggests on page 54 that that part of St. Catherine Street located in the business district "could become more highly specialised in the high-end retail sector." In fact, I don't think this is such a good idea. Traditionally, this part of St. Catherine Street, with the greatest density of stores, has catered successfully to the broad population with goods offered at various price points. I don't think this successful formula should be altered. The streets devoted more to high end shopping downtown have traditionally been Sherbrooke Street between Peel and Guy Streets, and Peel Street between de Maisonneuve Boulevard and St. Catherine Street, with the possible additions of de la Montagne and Crescent Streets between Sherbrooke Street and de Maisonneuve Boulevard. I believe that, if anything, the city should try to strengthen, or at least maintain, the more high end vocation of these streets. In particular, when the Holt Renfrew store on Sherbrooke Street becomes part of the expanded Ogilvys department store, as it is supposed to do, the city should see to it that another high end store or stores occupy the current Holt Renfrew premises, since this store now serves as a commercial anchor not only for neighbouring stores on Sherbrooke Street but also for stores on neighbouring de la Montagne and Crescent Streets.

A suggestion I would like to make regarding St. Catherine Street is the desirability of improving Phillips Square, located on St. Catherine across from the Hudson's Bay store. This is the only public square on St. Catherine Street in the central business district, and it can be considerably improved, including by being better lit at night, and being used for artistic exhibits and by cultural groups. The same goes for the considerable open space in front of the St. James United Church, also on St. Catherine Street between City Councillors and St. Alexandre Streets, just a little east of Phillips Square. Together, these sites if properly used can help animate this part of St. Catherine Street. Lastly, I would like to see the city finally develop the proposed promenade along the west side of Clark Street going north from St. Catherine Street to the existing festival grounds around Place des Arts. As it is now, this space is simply a vacant lot which detracts from the appearance and usefulness of this part of St. Catherine Street.

## **7. Preservation of heritage buildings**

There are three heritage sites of value in the western part of downtown that are potentially under threat, and therefore require the city government to be vigilant to preserve them. The first is the former Mount Stephen Club building on the west side of Drummond Street between de Maisonneuve Boulevard and St. Catherine Street. This is being redeveloped as part of a hotel, but in such a way as to have damaged its structure. It is therefore necessary for the city to make sure this building is properly preserved and that the hotel is completed so that the public can enjoy the use of this heritage building. Second is the Holt Renfrew store building on the south side of Sherbrooke Street between de la Montagne and Crescent Streets. This is a distinctive and attractive art deco style building which is in danger of being torn down to make way for condos when Holt Renfrew likely vacates this store to relocate in the expanded Ogilvys department store. The city should ensure the preservation of this building as well as its occupation by another high end retail store or stores. Last is the former Donnacona naval building, formerly the Montreal Winter Club, on the east side of Drummond Street between Sherbrooke Street and de Maisonneuve Boulevard. The new owner of this building, associated with the Cirque du Soleil, wishes to tear it down, apart from preserving its facade, to make way for a high rise office building. Leaving aside that there is little demand right now for more office space downtown, it seems to me that a more creative and beneficial use of this building would be for it to be developed to provide a permanent venue for shows by the Cirque du Soleil and other circus groups, preserving the front part of the building--not just its facade--as a dining room/club, which is what it was originally as part of the Winter Club, and which part has been relatively well preserved. In addition to these three endangered sites, I would also like to draw attention to the former Eaton's department store 'Ninth Floor Restaurant', a magnificent art deco style restaurant built in 1931, which was closed by the current owner of this building in 1999, for no obvious good reason. The city government should seek to get this restaurant refurbished and reopened to the public, and in fact get rid of the owner of this massive and centrally located building, the largest on St. Catherine Street, who has grossly mismanaged this building since taking it over.

## **8. Cultural and entertainment venues downtown**

The city's downtown strategy, in discussing the availability of cultural and entertainment venues downtown, fails to mention that many of these venues have been closed in the Quartier des spectacles area due to real estate developments, and that the city government let this happen by approving these developments. Specifically, the musical venues The Spectrum, Le Medley, clubs Les Saints and Opera, all large and self financed venues, were destroyed by real estate developers taking over the buildings where these venues were located--although the building containing Les Saints and Opera has not yet been destroyed, only boarded up. Also, the Cabaret Juste Pour Rire and Le Musee Juste Pour Rire closed down about six years ago for financial reasons. I would suggest that the city insists that the real estate developers who destroyed these venues provide for new equivalent venues in their new developments--none of which have been built, apart from the one destroying Le Medley--provided musical promoters can be found to operate these new venues. And municipal subsidies might be offered to get these new venues off the ground. And I suggested above that the former Donnacona naval building be transformed into a venue for shows by the Cirque du Soleil and other circus groups.

In conclusion, I hope that you will mention, agree with and retain as many of my suggestions and views as possible, or at least their gist or spirit, in your final report to the city government. I believe that, taken collectively, my suggestions would result in a significant improvement to the Montreal downtown, and particularly to the western part of it, where I live and work.

**Robert Hajaly, Montreal**