

The Future of Downtown Montreal
Some Practical Suggestions to Ensure its Survival and Growth

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the Office de consultation publique de Montréal

Introduction

Since the passage of bills 22 and 101 (The Charter of the French Language) and continuous growth of Quebec nationalism, the City of Montreal and its downtown core has suffered greatly via serious economic decline that is still ongoing with disastrous results. Even the City of Toronto, in its worst years of economic growth, still outpaces that of Montreal's and Toronto has already created a second downtown/office core in the Young and Steeles section of the city and a new waterfront residential district that has formed a new skyline with condominium towers.

The economic future of Montreal and its downtown core can easily be rectified by the creation of a language law-free zone from the Ontario border to most of greater Montreal, including the Eastern Townships and the Western Laurentians, but this will not happen and Mayor Denis Coderre in his request for Montreal to have a special status as a region in Quebec, has already stated that Bill 101 and language laws will continue to apply in the city. This being a dead-end, we have to recognize that Montreal's economy is no longer living on the benefits of economic growth, but eating into its capital as the economic base continues to decline and disappear and the economic strength of the middle classes continues to wither away and the entrepreneurial base erodes.

Whereas Toronto has more commercial arteries than Montreal, which incidentally are in solid shape economically and reflect the wealth of its citizens with a vast range of chain stores and independent businesses that reflect the spending power of its people, Montreal's Ste. Catherine Street, de Maisonneuve Road, and Rene Levesque Blvd. (formerly Dorchester Blvd.) and the streets that intersect them are dying and have essentially experienced minimal or zero growth and at worst, serious decline.

So the question arises, what can be done, knowing the factors limiting the recovery, to restore the City of Montreal as one of the economic centers of Canada as opposed to being a backwater that only thrives due to financial support and investment by the federal, provincial, and municipal governments?

This brief clearly cannot provide all the answers, which are complex and depend upon concerted actions to repair the damage done and restore the economic health of the city; but it can stress some of the measures that can be avoided to cause further economic decline and a loss of citizens to the suburbs and off-island municipalities where businesses, offices, and residential growth is occurring.

What Not to Do

Rejecting the REM Commuter Train

Firstly, Montreal must renounce its support of the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec's Réseau électrique métropolitain commuter train that will go from the South Shore through

downtown Montreal and then to the West Island and end in Two Mountains. This \$5.5 billion train proposal will only result in more urban sprawl and strengthens communities outside of the City of Montreal and off-island.

We need Mayor Coderre to reject the proposal completely so that we can create a first-class public transit system that will connect all parts of the city with the downtown core and at the same time, increase the economic life in all existing city neighbourhoods. So instead of the REM, we should stress the need for public transit investments:

- to extend the Metro into new neighbourhoods so that buses can be transferred to areas where there is no existing Metro stations. This can be done with the Blue, Orange, and Green lines.
- to install efficient tramway lines on major arteries across the city to create a unified network, as this city once had, that will create effective local and regional public transit. This ensures excellent public transit at the local level, links the tramway to the Metro and to downtown, and at the same time, allows people in the downtown area and surrounding areas to have better access to other parts of the city that they rarely visit.
- to improve the existing commuter rail services on the island, which serves the East and West Ends, and to improve bus services to the train stations.

We do need to get more cars off the streets and more people onto public transit, and as we all know, there are many areas where there is insufficient buses to serve the public, such as the 105 line in NDG (Notre Dame de Grace) and the East End, where community groups and individuals have long demanded more buses and Metro stations.

When we strengthen the downtown core, we strengthen all of Montreal. And we must realize that it is not a one-way street. For the city's economy to thrive, it just cannot be downtown that expands and is revitalized, but all of the city's neighbourhoods. There is no reason why we cannot have several downtown and regional district hubs, similar to New York City and Toronto. We have a great city and for many, they just know their individual area well and that of downtown.

Neglecting Our Parks and Green Spaces

Mount Royal Park, one of the city's jewels, is dying under the watch of the Coderre administration, which instead of planting trees on the mountain and protecting its ecosystem and biodiversity, is recklessly spending \$42 million plus for a green walkway from the mountain to the Old Port; \$3.45 million on 27 granite stumps to serve as seats on Mountain Royal; and is now floating an idea to build a gondola system from Old Port to Mount Royal.

Mount Royal is a symbol of Montreal and well-known to most Montrealers and those who appreciate and love the city. If we let it die, we all lose. And Mount Royal Park is dying from

over-use via events, the public, mountain bikers, and other users of the park. We can ensure, through intelligent solutions, means to ensure that the park fulfils the following goals:

- a major wilderness area for the city that is home to many species of birds and animals and threatened flora.
- a major year-round recreational area for hundreds of thousands of Montrealers of all ages.
- a major tourist destination for the millions of tourists who visit the city annually.

We also need to preserve existing green spaces in the downtown area that are threatened with development. The Coderre administration is permitting the remaining undeveloped green spaces to be developed, while simultaneously spending over \$100 million to create new parks and green spaces. This makes absolutely no sense whatsoever and reflects the city's attitude that green space is meant to be destroyed. This is the case in Pierrefonds where Mayor Coderre, CDN/NDG Mayor Russell Copeman, and Pierrefonds Mayor Jim Beis want to destroy 185 hectares of wilderness/green space to build over 5,500 homes and increase urban sprawl when the city could redevelop existing low-density commercial and industrial sprawl to create the housing and retain the businesses. The city is also spearheading, with the full support of Saint Laurent Mayor Alan DeSousa, the destruction of wetlands at the Technoparc Montreal site instead of building the proposed Hubert Reeves Eco-Campus on existing urban sprawl in Saint Laurent.

Other major North American and European cities such as Toronto, San Francisco, Tulsa, London, Munich and others have found ways to incorporate and link several parks via bike paths and public transit and to have economic growth occur simultaneously. The city lacks imagination on putting forward solid, common sense, and practical ideas and initiatives that other municipalities have brought forward of late and have implemented hundreds of years ago.

Neglecting Our Municipal Infrastructure

Instead of simply putting in well-thought and designed sidewalks and infrastructure such as lighting, benches, trees, squares, and other elements that would reflect various downtown neighbourhoods and create destinations that people want to visit and shop in, there is no sense of rhyme or reason to the way our downtown is designed and furnished.

This is a great pity as there is so much potential to upgrade our city and enhance the many treasures that we have and are sadly deteriorating before our eyes.

Instead, we have Mayor Coderre who just spent over \$750,000 to refurbish a gazebo on Mount Royal; \$80 million on an ill-conceived plan to upgrade Ste. Catherine Street, which includes heated sidewalks; over \$12 million to upgrade a small square adjacent to city hall; \$175 million to cover part of the expressway adjacent to city hall; and countless other expenditures of questionable value.

Destroying Heritage Buildings Willy-Nilly

The Coderre administration is deliberately permitting heritage buildings to be destroyed willy-nilly, such as the Maison Alcan, Winter Club, and two adjacent graystone homes on a section of the Sherbrooke West in the heart of the Golden Square Mile district so that a 30-storey office tower can be built on the site.

Years earlier, Mayor Coderre permitted the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to demolish two perfectly intact graystone homes on the east side of Bishop Street between Sherbrooke and de Maisonneuve to build a new wing of the museum. These homes should have been saved and the museum could easily have saved them and still build the extension.

Conclusion

Other pertinent points will be raised during my presentation to the committee, but I would stress in my conclusion that much can be done to restore and enhance the downtown core economically and to make it a destination for shopping, tourism, entertainment, and a place to live. I have also stressed the current policies that must not be pursued and by ceasing to pursue them, provide ways to reverse the damage that has been done and continues to be done.

The majority of people care about Montreal and its success in the future – not just the downtown core, but that of the whole island. We can focus on particular districts and neighbourhoods, but we also need a unified vision and plan that is well-thought out. We have a great pool of talented people in various fields living in Montreal. Clearly we can tap into that resource to develop a master plan that will guide now and into the future.