

Brief presented to the Office de consultation de Montréal on the question of the future use of the Benny Farm site

December 2, 2003

I welcome the opportunity to address this Commission on the future use of the Benny Farm site. I live downtown in a housing co-operative which I helped to found. I've been active in trying to keep the Benny Farm housing available for low and modest income households since 1991 when CMHC first announced that the housing was slated for demolition. I was an active member of the Fonds foncier communautaire Benny Farm during all of its existence.

I would first of all like to present the case against any present change in zoning regulations on the site that would make possible the construction of institutional buildings on the site. I propose that no zoning change be made until the concrete plans for the two institutions in question -- namely, the CLSC and the sports/recreation centre on Monkland, between Cavendish and Benny -- are finalized and made public, and the financing for the institutions is solid and made public.

There is serious question as to the financing available for each institution: for the CLSC, although the Régie has given its approval, no Cabinet approval is yet available; in consideration of the current provincial government's questioning of the roles of the CLSCs and its interest in cutting costs, it is not a foregone conclusion that the funding needed for the proposed plan will be available.

As for the sports/recreation centre, there are divided opinions in the community as to the nature of this centre, its size, and its governing structure. Until these questions are answered, to say nothing of the funding to build and staff it being assured, I believe that no zoning changes should be made.

For example, a clearly negative scenario might be that the zoning change is made, no community consensus is arrived at, the funding is not secured, and several years down the line, a private sports club bids on the land. Without the requirement of public hearings, the City could sell the land to the private sports club.

Since further public hearings are not required after the zoning change by-law is passed, the future use of that piece of land destined for the two institutions is no longer part of community discussion; not a good situation, in my opinion.

Secondly, I would like to address the question of the specific sites chosen for the CLSC and the sports/recreation centre in the whole site plan now before us.

I take as a given that the CLSC needs a new home. Its present office down a steep hill is difficult for many clients to reach. The CLSC should be easily accessible for all kinds of clients; that would obviously then be on Sherbrooke Street, on the 105 bus line that runs every 3 to 5 minutes all day;

an institution with clients and staff coming and going all day does not belong on a quiet residential street with 2 bus lines that run every 20 to 30 minutes.

The need for a sports/recreation centre seems, by all accounts, to be unknown at this time. I believe that is why the City is proposing to make a needs assessment survey before making any concrete plans. I do not have an opinion on this question of need, and I leave that for others.

What I do have an opinion on, is the chosen site; again, on a quiet residential street. A centre which could offer day care starting at 8 a.m. and could end the day at 10 p.m. with teen's activities, community meetings, and sports activities would involve noise, cars, and comings and goings all day, 7 days a week. This seems to me very poor urban planning.

The current plan by Saia Barbarese Topouzanov puts the housing for young families with children on busy, noisy, air-polluted Cavendish, and proposes to tear down housing on lightly traffic residential Monkland in order to build two 3-story buildings with 90 parking spaces that will service, together, 200 to 300 individuals a day.

I cannot speak more strongly against such a preposterous proposal, and I don't understand why the homeowners along Benny and east on Monkland, are not objecting.

I'm against any housing being torn down. As a social worker, I have seen, over the last forty years, families and lonely individuals living in cramped, badly maintained dwellings. I see what it does to those families and individuals; I have also seen what secure, decent and reasonably priced housing does to those same kinds of households. There is no one item that helps households out of poverty more directly than decent housing they can afford. I breaks my heart to see it torn down to put up institutions that can be placed in many other places in NDG.

In summary, my points to the Commission are:

1. Defer the request for zoning change until plans and financing are secured and public;
2. Locate the CLSC on Sherbrooke Street;
3. Include in the needs assessment for a sports/recreation centre, the search of an alternative space for such a centre;
4. If no alternatives can be found for either or both, and they will eventually be built on the current Benny Farm site, reduce the space allotted for parking and place the institutions on Cavendish and/or the southern part of the site.

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