

Brief to OCPM re heights and densities of Montreal downtown, from Robert Hajaly

My name is Robert Hajaly, and I live in the western part of downtown Montreal. My comments will be chiefly, though not exclusively, about proposed heights and densities in the western part of downtown. Overall, I believe the city has placed too much weight on attracting real estate investment at the expense of ensuring development that is harmonious with its surroundings, preserves heritage and respects the City's own aim of creating a distinctive downtown skyline form of a gentle summit analogous to that of Mount Royal (as per page 16 of "Cadre de Revision des Hauteurs et Densites du Centre-Ville"). I will list a number of specific objections to the proposed heights and densities that bear out my general view, and ask for revisions to these proposals.

1. Turning to page 35 of the Cadre, it is proposed that the permitted height on the south side of Sherbrooke Street between de la Montagne Street and just west of Bishop Street, covering the Holt Renfrew store and the Museum of Fine Arts, be raised from 25 to 65 metres (about 213 feet). This is inviting the demolition of these properties, particularly of the Holt Renfrew store, and their replacement by high-rise condos. Since the owner of Holt Renfrew recently bought Ogilvy's store on St. Catherine Street there has been speculation that the owner would move Holt Renfrew into Ogilvy's, selling the Holt Renfrew building and site to a condo developer who would tear down the Holt Renfrew building and erect a high-rise condo there, which this proposed change in height would allow. This would be a disaster architecturally, as the Holt Renfrew building is an outstanding art deco masterpiece, commercially, as this would seriously diminish competition between high-end stores, and most seriously, would damage Sherbrooke Street as a luxury shopping street. Therefore this change in height must not be permitted in order to prevent this real estate development.

2. The Cadre page 35 suggests a change in heights on both sides of Mackay Street just north of Rene-Levesque Boulevard from 25 to 120 metres. This could encourage the demolition of the attractive Victorian townhouses on the north side of Rene-Levesque proceeding west from Mackay, the last Victorian vestige on this part of Rene-Levesque. So this change should not be permitted and the height permitted over these townhouses should be no more than 25 metres.

3. More generally, the height of 210 metres (689 feet) permitted immediately north of Rene-Levesque down to St. Antoine Street going west should be ended at Drummond Street, rather than at Lucien L'Allier/Crescent Street as at present; following which the height would decline to 120 metres (394 feet) from Drummond to Lucien L'Allier, and then to 80 metres (262 feet) from Lucien L'Allier to Guy Street (or to Amesbury Street on the south side of Rene-Levesque). This is all to permit a gradual decline in heights from the centre of the downtown to the periphery. What the City's proposal would do instead is create a long table-like plateau along Rene-Levesque from Lucien L'Allier/Crescent Street in the west to Clark Street in the east (see page 43 of the Cadre for the eastern limit of Clark Street), which is hardly the gentle summit profile they claim to be making. Anyhow, heights of 210 metres (689 feet) for residential buildings west of Drummond Street, as now proposed, is apt to be overwhelming for the people who live there. Even 120 metres (394 feet), if repeated one building after the other, is a bit too much, which is why I've limited it to Drummond to Lucien L'Allier. And, once again the height permitted over the Victorian townhouses on Rene-Levesque just west of Mackay Street should be no more than 25 metres, notwithstanding what I've said about heights in this point.

4. The permitted height north of Overdale Street is rightly left at 25 metres, to avoid overwhelming the townhouses on the south side of the street, but the density north is raised from 3 to 6 (page 35 of the Cadre), which suggests there will be a massive wall of housing on the north side of Overdale, especially if the low density Lafontaine mansion is left in place. So

this density should be reduced to no more than 4, the next lower level.

5. Heights north of Rene-Levesque to north of St. Catherine Street, between Guy and Drummond Streets, of 25 metres should be left unchanged rather increased to 35 metres as proposed in order to harmonise more with the remaining townhouses along these streets. It isn't necessary to permit 35 metres to promote real estate development, as shown by the successful Viva Lofts development on Bishop Street above Rene-Levesque which has 8 floors, within the 25 metres (82 feet). When developers are finished developing the higher sites along Rene-Levesque they will develop these lower height sites because they will have no other choice if they wish to satisfy the demand for downtown living. Some people prefer not to be overwhelmed by their living environment on these narrow side streets.

6. Keep the permitted height around the intersection of De Maisonneuve Boulevard and de la Montagne Street at 44 (or now 45) metres rather than the proposed 65 metres. This is an area of lower rise clubs, restaurants and other buildings and this should be respected. Don't make narrow de la Montagne dark with the shadows of too high rise buildings.

7. The north side of Sherbrooke Street from Simpson Street in the west to McTavish Street to the east should have permitted heights no more than 45 metres (148 feet), not the 65 metres (213 feet) now permitted. Buildings of 65 metres would overwhelm, diminish and be discordant with the old, grand apartment buildings and remaining townhouses on this street, and would reduce the sunlight on this street. For much the same reasons the permitted height along the south side of Sherbrooke between de la Montagne and Stanley Streets should also be no more than 45 metres, not the now permitted 65 or 120 m (394 feet).

8. Turning now to the south of the downtown and page 39 of the Cadre, buildings on the west side of Victoria Square between Viger Avenue and St. Antoine Street should have a permitted height no more than 120 metres (394 feet) as at present not the suggested change to 210 metres, which would completely obliterate the sun from this narrow square which is used by the office workers in this area. The long, narrow strip going south along and east of Duke Street (or what is now the Bonaventure Autoroute, not shown on the map on page 39) should be kept at 60 metres (197 feet), not the proposed change to 80 metres (263 feet). 80 metres is way out of scale with the buildings immediately to the east or west of this strip and would overwhelm, diminish and darken these buildings. In fact, the appropriate height limit for buildings in this area is 45 metres (148 feet) for the Duke Street strip and 35 metres (115 feet) to the immediate east and west. As for the City's desire to create a "prestige" gateway into the city centre along what is now the Bonaventure Autoroute this was criticised by the OCPM consultation on this project (published March 18 2010) as lacking any connection with its neighbourhood and not encouraging its development. In my own view, buildings of height more compatible with their neighbourhood but of consistently good quality could make just as favourable an impression on people entering the downtown. Just look at the view down the east side of Victoria Square and McGill Street down to the port as seen from an elevated standpoint on Beaver Hall Hill to the north for an example confirming what I've just claimed.

9. Finally, turning to the east and page 43 of the Cadre, the one change I would suggest is to keep the permitted height of buildings from north of Viger Avenue south to St. Antoine Street and from St. Urbain Street to east of St. Dominique Street at 44 (or 45) metres (148 feet), not the suggested change to 80 metres (263 feet), in order to preserve the view from the Champs de Mars not only of the mountain (the City's sole concern) but also of the downtown skyline to the south of the mountain--one of the few places from which these two profiles can be seen side by side, a unique Montreal sight. In fact to preserve this view, this area I've just mentioned should have a permitted height no more than 35 metres (115 feet) or even 25 feet (82 feet). Another reason to keep these building heights limited is that building very high buildings of up to 80 metres over the Ville-Marie Autoroute (over which this area I'm talking about is located) will cut

off Old Montreal from the downtown to the north just as much, at least psychologically, as the open Autoroute does now--so why repeat this error? Besides, very tall buildings are completely foreign to Old Montreal to the south of this area in question and to Chinatown to the immediate north. If the City wants this developed by private developers let the City pay for the cost of covering the Autoroute--or perhaps more justly the province, which created the Autoroute.

Please note that the reason for some words being pushed together (just like I did) and for a few other small errors in my text is because my computer is suddenly not working properly, preventing me from fixing these errors properly. Sorry for this, and I hope it didn't make it more difficult to read my brief or understand me.

Yours sincerely, Robert Hajaly