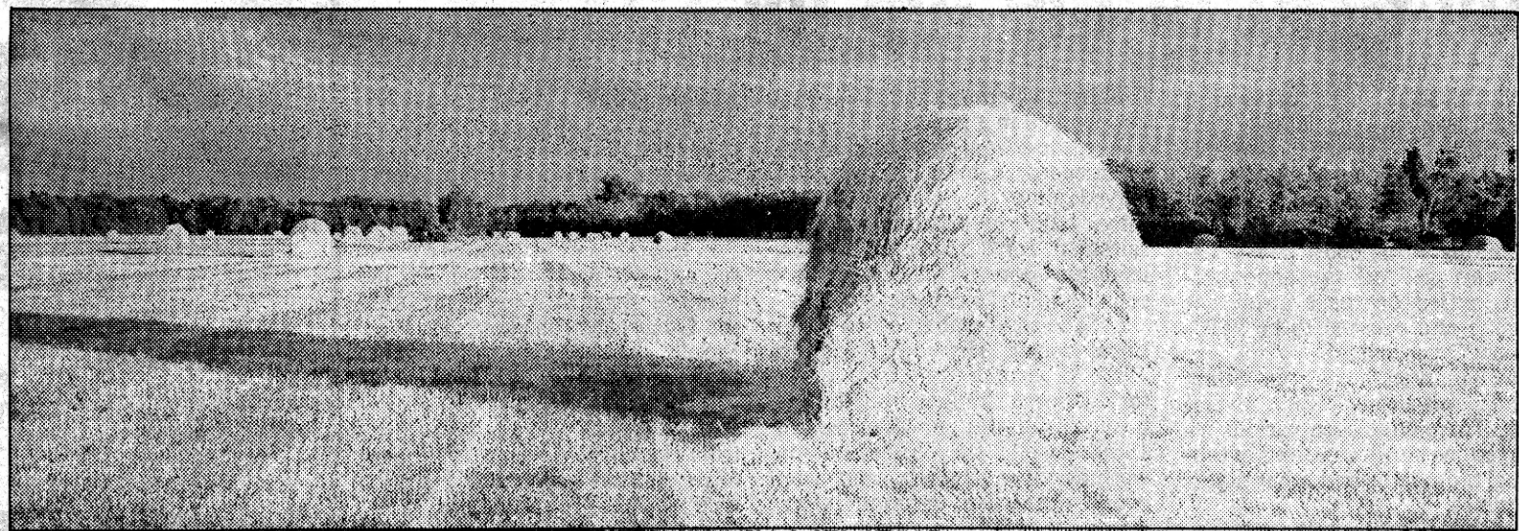


C O M M E N T



Fall scene in Senneville: these haystacks and open fields are protected agricultural land. De-zoning would make it available to developers.

A piece of the farm

MUC proposal would deplete prime agricultural land

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Will the last tracts of prime farmland in the Montreal Urban Community (MUC) be lost to urban development?

On June 19, 1991, the MUC council voted to request the Quebec government to de-zone about 700 hectares of farmland in the MUC, equal in size to about three-and-a-half times Mt. Royal Park. That request reverses a long-standing commitment to protect the urban farm zone.

After public hearings this Thursday, the Commission de protection du territoire agricole du Québec (CPTAQ) will determine the fate of the MUC lands.

Incomplete analysis led to erroneous conclusions in a July 15 *Gazette* editorial, "Develop the MUC's farmland. The more critical examination that follows shows that the de-zoning is neither justified nor necessary.

In the late 1970s, the Quebec government had the foresight to realize that, with the urbanization of Quebec occurring at a rapid pace, there was an urgent need to protect our farmland from rampant development. A protected agricultural land bank was set up as a "permanent" agricultural zone. In the fertile St. Lawrence lowlands region around Montreal, in such areas as the North Shore, the South Shore, Laval and Vaudreuil, etc., approximately 250,000 hectares were included in the zone.

Since 1985, this land bank in the St. Lawrence lowlands has been depleted by over 22,000 hectares. This depletion continues unabated.

The protected zone in the MUC, located in Pierrefonds, Ile Bizard, Senneville and Ste. Anne de Bellevue, forms a composite of landscape elements — forests, beaches, shoreline and the only farmland left in the MUC — approximately 1,000 hectares of prime agricultural land.

Hot summer days and the longest frost-free growing season in Quebec boosts the land's potential for bumper harvests. An exhaustive report prepared for the MUC by agronomist Florian Bernard in 1989 calls for the last 1,000 hectares to be preserved as a minimum critical mass for agriculture to be viable in the MUC.

The MUC's plan to de-zone 700 hectares carves the heart out of the protected agricultural zone and forecloses all options for viable farming on MUC territory in the future.

Why should we be concerned with the protection of urban farmland? Only 4.6 per cent of Canada's land mass is prime agricultural land. Most cities have developed at the expense of this valuable land. In the last 20 years, over half (58 per cent) of the land used for expansion was prime land. Once built on, this land can never be reclaimed for agriculture.

Under siege from urban development, farming is eventually forced onto lower-quality agricultural lands in remote areas. Much more land of similar soil quality would be needed in areas where the climate is poorer to equal the production potential of the MUC farmland.

Such replacement involves a higher cost to both the farmer and the consumer, reflecting increased costs of farming, energy and transportation. With poorer soil and climate, the farmer is forced to use more synthetic pesticides and fertilizers.

Then why is the MUC so eager to free its prime farmland for development? It appears that the MUC has caved in to political pressures exerted by land speculators who now own most of the land in the farm zone. What a pity that the government has not had the backbone to send out a clear message to the developers that this land is not up for grabs. The continual threat of de-zoning has served as a disincentive to urban farmers to keep farming and made them easy prey for speculators.

The MUC proposal to de-zone the prime farmland is surely not because of a lack of land for development. The MUC boasts plenty of available land — recent statistics reveal approximately 6,000 hectares still available for residential, commercial and industrial use. The portion set aside for residential development will provide for the construction of more than 100,000 housing units without even touching the farmland. At the average rate of development over the last five years, the existing land banks for residential construction will last well into the next century.

The Gazette editorial suggested that saving the MUC farmland from development would transfer this development to suburbs off the island and accentuate the problem of urban sprawl. It was argued that the development of the MUC farmlands would halt the flight of the population from the city centre to communities off the island. Such linkage is spurious since so much land is available for development in the MUC.

The de-zoning of prime farmland in communities such as Laval and on the South Shore has helped accelerate rampant development and urban sprawl. The loss of prime farmland is wrong whether it occurs on-island or off-island.

Quebec is not short of land unsuitable for cultivation and this is where responsible

planners should be locating building projects. The decision to de-zone the 700 hectares located primarily in western Pierrefonds and Ile Bizard, especially when plenty of land is available for development, can only serve to drain further the city centre.

In December 1989, the MUC showed vision in recognizing the "green space deficit" on the island of Montreal and adopted a \$200 million program for green space acquisition. Last June, the MUC approved the creation of a re-greening non-profit corporation to plant trees after studies showed the need to increase the vegetation cover on MUC territory by 25 per cent.

The logical extension of these measures would be for the MUC to preserve the agricultural zone. This "greening" measure would be fiscally responsible and not require any cash outlay of the taxpayers' money in these tough economic times.

We contend that most Montrealers would rather live in an attractive garden environment than in a concrete jungle. Eliminating the farmlands will further deplete the MUC's dwindling open green spaces and drive more people to live off-island.

To help curb the flight to the greener suburbs, it is rational to retain the MUC's natural elements. Access to areas of countryside that include farms and woodlots for recreation and education are clearly part of the formula.

The Bernard study estimated that the remaining farmland could generate \$22 million in annual revenues and related economic spin-offs, and create more than 450 permanent jobs. What an exciting vision: Montreal growing its own fresh produce!

In the early part of this century, Montreal was famous for its production of high quality fruits and vegetables, especially melons. Cities around the world are expanding urban food production programs. In Europe and various U.S. states, foodland preservation methods, such as community-supported agriculture, public and private Land Trusts with protective development rights or easement strategies, have shown the way to save these vital resource lands in perpetuity.

Such a vision for Montreal could become reality, Bernard concluded, if there were the political will to consolidate the farm zone with careful strategic planning and financial incentives. For now, the MUC appears to have lost this political will. The consequences of such short-sightedness may not be immediate, but if our best farmlands continue to disappear in and around our urban centres, we will be forced to import many of the crops now grown here. If we believe in the principle of sustainable development, we must preserve our farmland, a precious non-renewable resource, for future generations. It is imperative that the CPTAQ refuse the request to de-zone the MUC's last prime agricultural land.