

## Agricultural Park and Rural Residential, the Best Model for West Pierrefonds

Brief to the Office de La Consultation Publique de Montréal (OCPM) Concerning the proposed west Pierrefonds development

I am submitting comments and supporting evidence to voice strong opposition to the west Pierrefonds project proposed by the Pierrefonds-Roxboro borough council and city of Montreal identified as “Cap Nature” by the development interests. Instead the best project would combine preservation of most of the land as green space permitting agriculture, conservation, recreation or small business.

### Background

It is clear that the majority of residents and taxpayers are also opposed for many important reasons including:

- loss of the last remaining significant natural green space adjacent to two regional parks (Cap-St-Jacques and L'anse-à-l'orme),
- cutting down mature trees,
- high cost to the public as well as future residents for infrastructure in a rural, landlocked and mostly unserved sector,
- serious existing problems of traffic congestion due to inadequate roads (two-lane W. Gouin Boulevard and feeder residential streets only),
- poor maintenance and surveillance by the Pierrefonds-Roxboro borough including slow snow-removal, beyond-capacity snow storage in the west Pierrefonds snow dump which was poorly planned and moved adjacent to residential zones, unenforced speeding and poor road conditions,
- annual flooding of low-lying land north and along Gouin Boulevard which results in damage to existing public and private property at high costs,
- high-density urban development that will destroy the rural landscape.

At least 18,000 residents signed a petition to save the farmland, forests and wetlands for conservation. Residents also expressed opposition to such a high-density urban development that will transform the rural landscape and natural beauty into an urban wasteland with all the problems of urban areas including traffic, crime, high-cost of policing and related costs, unemployment and competition for existing jobs, high-cost of living, urban sprawl, overcrowding and pollution (air, water and visual). Such a project will likely worsen flooding that plagues most low-lying areas along the river in Pierrefonds and elsewhere.

Widespread and ongoing opposition to this project by many individuals and groups including residents has been voiced at borough and city council meetings, in the media and online for years before the borough and city adopted the 2004 Montreal urban plan which included a proposed high-density mixed-residential development in west Pierrefonds. Nevertheless since at least 2005 the Pierrefonds-Roxboro borough and city of Montreal have held private meetings not open to the public and have been spending taxpayer's money and time planning a development of 6000 dwelling units. Also, the borough and city have spent lavishly hiring private consultants when there are experts on staff or other options to evaluate the project, expand the Pierrefonds water treatment plant, renovate and upgrade sewer and water pipes and other expenses in preparation for such a project according to the media and city and borough documents.

Many politicians also voice opposition to some or all of this project including Pierrefonds-Roxboro councilors Justine McIntyre and Roger Trottier (members of Vrai Changement party) and Project Montreal party leader Valérie Plante and city councilors in her party. However, Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre and city councilors in his party including Pierrefonds-Roxboro Borough Mayor Jim Beis, councilors Catherine Clement-Talbot and Yves Gignac voice support for the project at public meetings and in media reports.

According to the Pierrefonds-Roxboro borough information document (Pierrefonds-Ouest Sector, Nov. 2016, p. 9) the borough of Pierrefonds-Roxboro has permitted the development of more than 200 residential units in recent years in the west sector mainly along Gouin Boulevard without proper planning, road, traffic-control or other improvements. The borough's and city's poor track record undermines their credibility and the public's trust that the proposed plan or an amended version and the promises will solve existing or prevent future problems created by such a high-density urban, mixed-residential project.

#### OCPM Consultation

There is too much information to consult in a too short a period of time for citizens. Most or all of the documents posted on the OCPM website since the public consultation formally began date from 2016 or earlier which means that the borough, city and the OCPM could have made these documents available months before the consultation process began thereby allowing the public more time for review and to ask questions based on these documents. The public was limited to question periods at the only two public information sessions held March 26 and April 4. Also, the borough, city, OCPM and promoters as well as other interested parties have had an unfair advantage of having access to more of this information or unknown information sooner and possibly influencing the information and consultation process.

#### Documentation Problems and Lack of Transparency

Along with inadequate time to consult documents, most documents are not bilingual which makes it difficult for people who are not fluently bilingual to understand the complex and possibly biased information. The borough and city documents are at best general in nature and sometimes lack references.

#### Non-Binding Consultation instead of a detailed Plan Subject to Referendum

The legal framework of the OCPM is a non-binding, public meeting rather than a true consultation and it does not give residents or taxpayers any legal right to oppose any part of the project such as a referendum for zoning changes. This is undemocratic and unjust as the public and residents are property owners or renters who have rights and who will have to also bear the financial and environmental consequences.

#### Preservation of Last-Remaining Farmland in Pierrefonds and Agricultural Landmarks including Buildings, Swales, Stone Walls

The public objected to many of the land-use and development plans proposed in the 2015 Montreal Urban Agglomeration land-use and development Plan and approved by the city council of Montreal which also makes up the majority of the Agglomeration council. While this plan is in effect, it is conceptual and easily changed. West Pierrefonds and the remaining agricultural areas in Senneville and Ile Bizard are the last remaining farmland within the territory of greater Montreal. These areas should be maintained for agriculture, recreation and conservation thereby protecting historic, very limited, vital and irreplaceable lands for the area residents, the entire population and future generations.

The information document refers to the integration of urban agriculture on p.18, which supports the importance of preserving agriculture in west Pierrefonds. I support this integration but only if such activities are properly managed in proper locations which are legally zoned in such a way to prevent nuisances to adjacent property owners. For example, bee keeping should only be permitted in agricultural zones.

The document also mentions preserving farm swales (agricultural ditches for drainage and water irrigation) for drainage and as agricultural features or landmarks. These swales serve a purpose, are landscape heritage and should be preserved and maintained by property owners.

But there is no mention of preserving other landmarks or agricultural landscapes such as stone walls which should also be preserved.

### Agricultural Zone Development Plan in Laval Returns Farmland to Cultivation, a Good Plan for west Pierrefonds

West Pierrefonds remains remarkably intact as an agricultural zone and rural area adjacent to W. Gouin Boulevard which serves as a direct route to markets for produce and services. Recently the city of Laval established an agricultural development plan in order to rehabilitate valuable fallow land. The agricultural park plan encourages agricultural business and serves as an incubator for local firms and Laval companies participating in a local buying program at local supermarkets. Laval is supporting a signage and agri-tourism initiative to help boost farm activities. A farm diversification network will also review best practices and make it available to all agri-food business on the island. Such a program in Pierrefonds could succeed for interested property owners with the help of the borough or city of Montreal and also from negotiating with Hydro-Québec for preferential rates for greenhouses.

### Plan Benefits Promoters not Families

Such a dense development project of 6000 or more dwellings with no details about actual dwelling type or cost seems planned to maximize promoters' profits rather than serve families or keep families on the island of Montreal. Recent news reports based on census figures confirm that young families and others continue to move off the island of Montreal in search of more affordable housing, better services and lower taxes.

### Plan does not respect Zoning Bylaws

According to the Pierrefonds-Roxboro zoning bylaw CA290040 the zoning for most or all of the proposed development and conservation area in west Pierrefonds is designated as code H1-2-111. This zoning permits single-family residential properties, detached, semi-detached or rowhouses only or park. Other property owners must formerly request a zoning change which is expensive in order to proceed with construction of a higher density or for another use (for example, commercial). By law eligible voters living in a contiguous zone may sign a register to oppose or not sign a register if in favour to contest zoning changes. Why are these promoters not required to follow such a procedure? Will they have to? I understand that the borough council majority Borough Mayor Jim Beis, and Councilors Catherine Talbot and Yves Gignac propose to proceed to a Special Planning Program (SPP) which will not require these property owners to submit the development to a register.

So by circumventing the democratic referendum procedure, the Pierrefonds-Roxboro council members who are in favour of this high-density project are preventing other property owners and residents from legally objecting to a zoning and site plan that will completely urbanize their neighbourhoods and increase their taxes to pay for the infrastructure that will mainly benefit the promoters and future residents.

### Preservation of Built Heritage and New Construction Integration on W. Gouin Boulevard Waterside Road

This development plan and the proposed urban boulevard threaten the remaining historic buildings, landscape and beautiful water and pastoral views along W. Gouin Boulevard. While the information document mentions the importance of preserving Heritage W. Gouin Boulevard, the legal framework is weak and recent development shows that the borough does not protect built or natural heritage. Unless the west Pierrefonds project is scaled back drastically or rejected, the remaining heritage buildings are at risk for demolition and inappropriate urbanization entirely replacing this rural road.

One of the oldest (circa 1800) remaining stone farmhouses, Maison Augustin Brisebois, located at 18639 W. Gouin Boulevard, is no longer inhabited and may be at risk. While the building is listed as a building of heritage value and recognized in the chapter of Pierrefonds-Roxboro of the Montreal Urban Plan, the borough and city have allowed the building to remain unoccupied which shows a deplorable lack of responsibility or vision.

### Flooding Risks and Impacts Likely to Increase with Development

There is almost no mention in the information document about the severe and annual impacts and risks associated with low-land flooding particularly in west Pierrefonds but also along the perimeter of the entire Island of Montreal and other islands including Ile Bizard. These impacts cost residents and taxpayers through providing emergency services of police, city employees, sandbags, etc. and potentially could cause catastrophic damage to streets and other infrastructure including the Pierrefonds water treatment plant located along Gouin boulevard. In fact in recent days and weeks flooding has been so severe that all of l'Anse a l'Orme Boulevard is closed and parts of W. Gouin and Pierrefonds Boulevards are also closed. The only option for drivers including buses and deliveries is to use other residential streets. The street plan shown for west Pierrefonds seems to show only Gouin and Pierrefonds or the as-yet not built nor approved north-south urban boulevard, which would leave residents trapped with no exit.

### CDPQ Infra REM Opposed by Taxpayers, Environmentalists and the BAPE

The Quebec government's announced to the public a new electric light-rail integrated transit project, in French, réseau électrique métropolitain (REM), in 2016 which will privatize major public transit infrastructure including the Agence métropolitaine de transport (AMT) Deux-Montagnes train line and the Mount Royal tunnel. The public continues to express opposition supported by a review and report by Quebec's environmental review board, in French, or BAPE about the high cost at more than \$6 billion, the technical problems of an elevated train, the financial risk from the sale of public assets to a private company and serious environmental impacts including loss of green space and farmland.

There are other problems that the government and the company which will own and operate the project, the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec (CDPQ Infra), have not shown they can solve or are planning to. Some of these other problems are:

- increase in cost of transit passes to fund the project which will discourage the use of public transit and burden low-income users who have no alternate means of transit,
- cost to replace existing heavy-rail electric train with lower capacity light-rail train system.
- less service in areas of high-density population including the center, east and southwest parts of the island of Montreal,
- replacing a direct train line (AMT Vaudreuil-Hudson) by a proposed indirect and longer route along Highway 40,
- corruption, without government and legal control,
- transit system that may fail to provide good public transit,
- fast tracking (projected construction to begin this year (2017) and be completed in 2020) an immense project when the government's track record is poor for follow through.

Information documents from CDPQ Infra for the REM do not actually explain how it will maintain train and bus service during the construction of the REM which will cause traffic and public transit chaos. The AMT Deux-Montagnes train line will have to be completely rebuilt along with any new stations and infrastructure. This line has the largest suburban train ridership in the province. Interruption of service will cause large numbers of people to abandon it and over saturate already congested road traffic in the Montreal region at a time of widespread major construction. Economic costs for users will increase while Société de transport de Montréal (STM) and AMT income will decrease. Air pollution levels will also increase.

I mention the REM project because a brief and vague description of the project is included in the information document for the west Pierrefonds project on p. 15. As is mentioned in the document, no train station for the REM will be located in west Pierrefonds so new residents and taxpayers will not be able to use this light-rail but they will be obliged to pay for it through their taxes. It is possible that bus service will be added to connect to the proposed station on Highway 40 in

Kirkland although there is already frequent but sometimes underused bus service on W. Gouin boul. This additional public cost, distance, time and possibly increased user fee may discourage public transit use rather than encourage it. Instead new residents will most likely drive to the REM station adding to already congested rush-hour traffic and increase the demand for limited available parking spaces at the planned REM station.

#### Costs and Risks to Taxpayers and Future Generations

Taxpayers should not pay for infrastructure for private development yet the Pierrefonds-Roxboro borough and Montreal city council propose to use public funds for most of the costs of this development. Neither the borough nor the city of Montreal seemed to provide detailed costs for the infrastructure or the estimated property taxes from the private development. These substantial costs include:

- underground infrastructure (sewers and water lines),
- electric and gas service,
- local roads, bike paths, sidewalks, parks and
- a very costly urban boulevard within the Highway 440 right-of-way between W. Gouin boulevard and Highway 40.

#### Recommendations

This information and analysis clearly shows that the proposed west Pierrefonds development plan is too dense, too urban and too vague. Such a development will destroy the ecosystem and biodiversity of the area as well as the built and natural rural heritage. Such a project would impose financial liabilities and hardship for taxpayers and permanently lower the quality of life for residents during and after construction which will continue for years or decades.

Therefore the OCPM should not recommend the proposed project. Instead the OCPM should recommend conservation of the area or the possibility of an agricultural park and rural residential permitting local or home-based businesses.

The OCMP should also recommend that the borough proceed by holding additional public information and discussion meetings including detailed cost-benefit analysis. After this the borough should proceed with a proposed detailed zoning plan for the area that will be subject to a register and referendum. Only after this should the promoters propose a detailed site development plan that conforms to bylaws. As this is an election year, the borough council should postpone such meetings until after the next election at which time elected officials may put forth a new plan which is subject to a register and referendum.

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