

Citizens denounce revised proposal for Cheval Blanc

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A scaled-back plan to build homes on a Pierrefonds ecoterritory did little to quell the ire of more than 100 residents who voiced their disapproval at a public meeting last week.

West Island developer Groupe immobilier Grilli presented blueprints for a controversial 251-unit housing project to Pierrefonds/Roxboro's urban advisory committee on Dec. 12. An earlier plan called for 650 residences on the site.

Last summer, Montreal announced it would swap five hectares of city-owned land in the Rapides du Cheval Blanc ecoterritory for 15 hectares of property owned by Grilli and \$700,000.

If the trade goes through, the city will give up a decontaminated snow dump, a former agricultural field and a landfill. In exchange, Grilli would give Montreal flooded, undevelopable land.

The proposal calls for single-family homes, townhouses, semi-detached houses and four-storey apartment buildings. Units are expected to fetch up to \$450,000, according to Grilli.

In September, Helen Fotopoulos, Montreal's executive committee member responsible for green spaces, said the city plans to create a 44-hectare nature park out of the remaining land in the ecoterritory.

But citizens from across the island of Montreal packed the council chamber last week to speak out against the proposal, which would eliminate 10 hectares of land in the heart of the ecoterritory.

Opponents of the project say Pierrefonds/Roxboro would be ignoring the wishes of residents if the development is accepted.

The whole area should be preserved, according to Roxboro resident David Fletcher, vice-president of the Green Coalition, a Montreal environmental group.

"Clearly there's a council there that's acting strictly on its own," he said.

"There's no outreach to the broader community to get input. The urgent need right now is acquisition, not the creation of parks," he added.

Fletcher said the entire parcel of land, which is home to several animal species already under pressure, could be conserved if the city simply avoids the swap.

Grilli's land consists of floodplains that cannot be built on, according to provincial law, he said.

Instead, Fletcher said Montreal is using public lands to help boost profits of a developer and provide views to the "privileged few" who can afford to live in the proposed homes.

"It's a nice open space that people use," he said. "It really is extraordinary that (Montreal) would trade away public land. Shame on them."

Pierrefonds/Roxboro Mayor Monique Worth said the development will be "great."

"Once you see it all, you're going to be very surprised that people were against it," she said.

The land swap, added tax revenue from the residences and funding from Montreal will help pay for the new park, Worth said.

"Montreal could have bought the whole area and it would have taken years to make it available (as a park)," she said, adding that tax revenue from the development is a "plus for everyone."

"It's a plus for us, but it's also a plus for Montreal," Worth said.

"You know very well they're going to be paying taxes, but the added part to that is the (creation of the) park," she added.

"There are always developers that own a number of lots and you can't ask those people to pay taxes on it and never be able to develop (it)."

The borough is expected to reach a decision on the proposal at a January council meeting.