

Conservationists mount drive to block Anse à l'Orme housing

Land zoned residential is prime eco-territory, Green Coalition says

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Conservationists are urging the Montreal island council to acquire a privately owned section of Anse à l'Orme Nature Park that is slated for residential development.

Wedged between Rivière à l'Orme and Kirkland's western border, the 13-hectare parcel of land is zoned for housing.

Owner Grilli Property Group eventually intends to build about 60 upscale houses on the site, according to Ste. Anne de Bellevue's urban development plan.

While Grilli has owned the land for years and plans to develop the area have long been discussed, the Green Coalition says the land is worth saving because it is home to rare and endangered species, such as black maple trees and several wild forest flowers. Also, a herd of about 50 white-tailed deer has been known to roam the Anse à l'Orme corridor, which stretches from Pierrefonds southeast to Highway 40.

"Every development in the West Island poses a threat to that herd of animals," said Green Coalition spokesperson David Fletcher.

"We see this (land) as important to be included in the conserved network in Montreal."

The land comprises the southern part of a larger parcel, known as Woods No. 3, and is divided by a hydro power line. The northern section was bought up by the defunct Montreal Urban Community in the early 1990s.

"The southern sector was left unacquired but it forms part and parcel of the same thing," Fletcher said. "It's ranked with the north sector as the highest of value on the island from an ecological and biodiversity standpoint."

The island's current green spaces policy identifies the land as an "eco-territory" that should be conserved, although that designation has no legal bearing.

Montreal councillor Helen Fotopoulos, in charge of the island's green spaces portfolio, says: "The ball is in Ste. Anne de Bellevue's court."

"That land is private and it's in Ste. Anne de Bellevue. It's their zoning that really is the question."

However, Ste. Anne de Bellevue Mayor Bill Tierney says the municipality cannot change the zoning to disallow residential development because it would be tantamount to expropriation and the town would have to compensate the owner - something Ste. Anne de Bellevue cannot afford.

Besides, Tierney says, the development would be good for his town because it would create a small tax base to help pay for repairs to Anse à l'Orme Rd. and set up a bicycle path to link up with Kirkland's.

"It's a different vision of sustainable development," Tierney said. "The vision you get from the Green Coalition and from the extreme greens in Montreal's park division is based strictly on the environment."

"Our vision has two other elements in it: social and economic. I would say it's a lot more pragmatic."

Tierney added that he doesn't believe development is imminent.

"I'm sure the people in the parks department in Montreal will be looking at it, wondering whether they will expropriate or buy it. But if Montreal decides to do that, we will be seriously losing the means to do our own sustainable development in Ste. Anne de Bellevue."