

Little-known Falaise St. Jacques threatened by expressway, says eco-group

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A Montreal environmental group fears that the Falaise St. Jacques — which is a densely-wooded linear green space hanging down a cliff on the south side of St. Jacques Street in NDG — could be endangered when a plan to restructure the Turcot Interchange is implemented a few years from now.

The parkland, which was created by the City of Montreal during the 1980s to rejuvenate a site that for decades had been a notorious dumping ground for everything from wrecked cars to junked refrigerators and old building materials, is also referred to as the St. Jacques Escarpment Ecoterritory.

Montreal, which purchased the land to create the space, carefully replanted the once barren slope with a wide assortment of trees and bushes in an effort to stabilize the earth under the cliff. Plans were initially to allow public access. That subsequently changed when it was discovered in more recent years that parts of the slope remained unstable and a potential danger to anyone who might pass through.

According to a brief submitted by the Green Coalition to a recent hearing of the Montreal Agglomeration's transportation and infrastructure commission, Transport Quebec has proposed placing the Ville Marie Expressway and Canadian National's rail line up next to the little-known Falaise.

"Presently this green area is almost inaccessible and is bombarded by the din of turbulent automotive traffic 24/7," stated the coalition's members. "If Highway 20 and the CNR are moved even closer, how do we square transportation policy with the public's right to access a natural space?"

"There is no clear policy regarding the Falaise and the surrounding area," says Avrom Shtern, a coalition member. "On the one hand, you have Transport Quebec announcing the highways and the railways being moved up close to it, and on the other hand you have Montreal announcing last year or the year before that this is a jewel that has to be protected and integrated."

While Shtern claims the Falaise's ecoterritory status, which was decreed by Montreal, means little, CDN-NDG borough mayor Michael Applebaum insists it is protected from development and from being defoliated. At the same time, however, he acknowledged that because of its isolation and other factors, the area is dangerous. As a result, there has been no effort to encourage access.

Former city councillor Sam Boskey, who served until 1998, recalls trying to sell the former Bourque administration on the idea of a useful green space that could be fully developed into a park.

"Once a year there was the mayor and there would be a tour of the neighbourhood, and for two years running I brought them to the Falaise," he said. "I hoped that this would kick start it, but it never seemed to do so. Most of the land assembly had been done. A good part of the paths along the side had been built. So it was a question of finishing it."