

Meadowbrook activists want new railway setbacks to stop housing

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Members of two local environmentalist groups, who are concerned that residential development could start at one of the West End's largest remaining green spaces — the Meadowbrook Golf Course — want Quebec to adopt new railway setback rules, which could permanently prevent housing from being built at Meadowbrook.

The Green Coalition and the Friends of Meadowbrook are endorsing a stance that already has the backing of several local municipal officials — including Côte St. Luc city councillor Dida Berku.

Proximity guidelines recently approved by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which represents cities across the country, and the Railway Association of Canada, an industry lobby group, recommend that the new minimum spacing from residential developments should be 300 metres from rail yards and 30 metres from rail lines.

Berku, who is responsible for environmental dossiers on Côte St. Luc city council, has been urging the City of Montreal to adopt the new setbacks — especially since Claude Dauphin, a senior member of the City's executive-committee, approved them as Montreal's representative in the FCM.

Dauphin is also mayor of the Borough of Lachine, where half of Meadowbrook is located. Because of the limited amount of space available to build housing at Meadowbrook, it is believed that the setbacks would make development of the golf course too impractical.

"If this were the law of the land, Meadowbrook could not be developed," the two groups said in a submission they made last week to the Railway Safety Act Review Panel, a federal government committee that was in Montreal while crossing the country for a revision of Canada's railway safety rules.

In their submission, the Friends and Green Coalition noted that as railway routes traversing rural parts of Canada have all but disappeared, there are fewer but busier mainlines, where housing has been built up to the edge of the right-of-way.

"For future sensitive residential areas adjacent to rail yards and main lines or natural spaces and green zones like Meadowbrook Golf Course that must be conserved," the new guidelines "must become the law of the land to avoid developments on such precious buffer zones" and to "mitigate calamities such as chemical spills, derailments near residential neighbourhoods," they said.

"As Côte St. Luc has said, they are enclosed, they're an enclave, there are only two main accesses — Cavendish and Westminster," Avrom Shtern, a spokesman for the groups, said in an interview with The Chronicle. He compared Côte St. Luc's historically close relationship with surrounding rail lines to what would happen at Meadowbrook were it developed.

"The problem is access, especially if there's a derailment," he said. "People in existing neighbourhoods are always complaining about rail noise, vibrations, possibilities of chemical spills. This will just be magnified a thousand-fold in Meadowbrook because of its proximity to so many railway facilities, including two active freight yards.

"If they implemented three hundred metres here from the property line, then it wouldn't be possible for them to develop the site," Shtern added. "I think the province should do that so that it overarches all municipalities ... If the federal government shows the way, then perhaps they'll see the necessity."