

Huge nature park expansion planned

180 hectares to be added to anse à l'orme. Executive committee meets in suburb for announcement

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After years of political pressure from environmental groups, the city has announced a major extension of the Anse à l'Orme nature park in the West Island borough of Pierrefonds/Roxboro.

The announcement came last night in the neighbouring borough of Île Bizard/Ste. Geneviève, as the executive committee held its ninth public meeting, an initiative that started six years ago to bring residents closer to their city government.

"It's the largest expansion of a park in Montreal in decades," executive committee member Helen Fotopulos said at the meeting.

Fotopulos, who is responsible for green space, said the city has received commitments from developers to protect 180 hectares - about the size of Mount Royal Park - of mostly wetland in the western end of Pierrefonds. The developers have said they will cede the land - for a price.

The area is off the southwest tip of the current Anse à l'Orme nature park.

At yesterday's meeting, the city approved a sum of \$675,000 to the nature preservation group Ducks Unlimited so the organization can negotiate a fair price with developers for the land.

Daniel Hodder, the city bureaucrat heading the project, explained the preserved land would be an extension of the current park, with walking and bicycle paths and cross-country ski and snowshoe trails in the winter.

He said the city is also working with the neighbouring town of Ste. Anne de Bellevue to buy another 40 hectares that would be added to the park.

Hodder said the developers are motivated to work with the city because they also own other land slated for protection.

"They can't build until the city builds roads and provides services such as buses and schools," Hodder said. "What we're saying is that we won't provide any of those services until the land in question has been protected."

Despite the good news, there were few members of the public in attendance at a CEGEP theatre to see the executive committee in action. Among about 50 people in attendance were city councillors, bureaucrats and journalists. There were only a handful of residents.

Last night's meeting was also short, about an hour, compared with closed-door sessions of the executive committee, which can last most of the day.

The executive committee, comprising the mayor and up to 11 city councillors, makes major decisions involving large sums of taxpayers' money. Among other things, the committee approves grants and bylaws and awards city contracts.

Critics say the committee must be overhauled or abolished so that major decisions aren't made behind closed doors.

When Mayor Gérald Tremblay was elected in 2002, he promised to hold several public executive committee meetings. But Darren Becker, a spokesperson for the executive committee, said there hasn't been a large turnout at any of the committee's public meetings.