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MRC's new tree policy far from panacea

The MRC officially announced the adoption of its Politique de l'arbre et des boisés last week. A step in the right direction, this document took two years and thousands of dollars to create, but much more is required from the provincial government if we are to preserve what little is left.

The Charest Liberals will call themselves environmentally friendly, but I am unimpressed. Vaudreuil Liberal candidate Yvon Marcoux and Soulanges candidate Lucie Charlebois attended the official launch of the PAB last week. If it was a gesture to the environment during their election campaign, it was an empty gesture.

That press conference would have been an ideal time for them to announce the preservation of a new green space in Vaudreuil-Soulanges, or the creation of a new fund for the region specifically for the environment.

This is what many have come to expect from Charest. We now have a promise that 50 percent of northern Quebec will be preserved, but Green Party candidate Guy Rainville is the only one stating that the immediate area around Montreal is the most biodiverse and important region to protect.

Charest has yet to respond to the Green Coalition's proposal for a regional nature park within and around Montreal. Ironically, the only two politicians attending the Green Coalition archipelago park proposal launch last year were former provincial Green Party leader Scott McKay (now with the PQ), and former Liberal environment minister, Thomas Mulcair. One need look no further than Mulcair to recognize Liberal double standards. Charest dumped Mulcair from cabinet simply because he was doing his job, fighting to preserve Mount Orford from development.

Charest, Charlebois and Marcoux trumpet their environmental record, but it's easy to call yourself a leading province on the environment when your primary energy source is water. Meanwhile the Liberal minority is going forward with the \$1.9-billion Gentilly-2 nuclear plant refurbishment in Becancour.

Like the federal Conservatives, the Liberals are well into their campaign and they are the only major party yet to have released their platform. There are only three weeks to go and we have yet to see any preservation or conservation proposals for the region of Montreal.

A perfect example of Liberal shortcomings is in the PAB itself. One section of the report provides a website address for provincial programs available to protect woodlands on private property, but visit the website and two of the tree programs were axed in 2007.

Authors of the PAB consulted with municipalities and agricultural unions, but this is the first we've heard of the document publicly. For a document that places a strong emphasis on engaging the community in protecting trees and woodlands, it seems consultation is only important once the parameters have been set. Environmental organizations and concerned citizens are of little consequence during the drafting of the document itself.

The same can be said for provincial Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE), which continues to draw flak for its poor public consultation process concerning the Romaine River hydroelectric project.

The same can be said for the Commission de protection du territoire agricole du Québec (CPTAQ), which was very

selective in its public consultations concerning the Canadian Pacific intermodal complex in Les Cèdres. And what are our MNAs doing to improve this situation, aside from showing up at press conferences?

The Liberals are campaigning on the economy when citizens are calling for better healthcare, and an integral part of healthy living is viable access to nature. It seems the only people with viable access to swathes of nature at the moment are those with deep pockets.

It's a real disappointment when we see species on the verge of extinction get trampled by development here in our own backyard because the tools aren't in place to protect them.

St. Lazare mayor Paul Carzoli often tells me that council does what it can with the tools that are available. Why, then, aren't you asking for better tools?

Municipal councils and the MRC are guilty in this respect. There are no demands to our MNAs or the provincial government within the PAB. Municipal leaders are always ready to take a stab at the Sûreté du Québec for their supposed poor service, but we've heard nothing of the sort when it comes to the poor resources available to protect our dying ecosystem.

If anything, all we've heard from municipalities are constant complaints that the ministry of environment is delaying another project as they conduct a study or slowly issue a certificate of authorization.

That's nonsense in my opinion. Take a look around your neighbourhood if you live in Vaudreuil-Soulanges and try to convince me that the ministry is slowing down development. If they are, I'd hate to see the state of things if the ministry didn't exist.

Legal measures currently in existence allow individuals to take others to court if a vulnerable species is put at risk by development.

Councils are prepared to spend thousands to go to court to fight over lost causes, yet they aren't willing to stick their neck out for endangered species, a case that can be won under existing laws.

All this to say that MRCs, municipalities and their councillors should be asking more from their provincial government when it comes to the environment. There simply aren't enough tools available, and empty gestures from the Liberals are not enough. The greater Montreal region is the area in most urgent need of preservation, and we've heard no bold proposals from the Liberals on this front so far.

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This being my final column as a full-time reporter, I'd like to thank all of the readers who are engaged in their communities. Accuse the Hudson/St. Lazare Gazette of bias toward the environment, but we write about the environment because it's changing so drastically here in our backyards.

Media on the west island don't give environmental preservation such strong coverage because, quite simply, there is little to no forest left.

The PAB is crucial in this respect. People from all walks of life should do what they can to preserve this precious region. Alongside and certainly inter-related with healthcare, the environment is perhaps the greatest concern for residents of Vaudreuil-Soulanges. I would urge everyone to work above and beyond what is required to protect what's left, whether you're with a sports organization or a local business.