

Not out of the woods yet

Montreal wants to preserve a mature forest, but Ste. Anne de Bellevue argues tax revenue doesn't grow on trees

MICHELLE LALONDE, The Gazette Published: Sunday, May 25, 2008

If the city of Montreal wants to preserve an ecologically valuable forest in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, it will have to pay off not only the real estate developer that owns the forest but also the town that stands to lose tax revenue if it is not developed.

At least, that's the view of Ste. Anne de Bellevue Mayor Bill Tierney.

Developers plan to build about 60 homes on 13 hectares of mature forest in what is known as Woods No. 3, tucked between the Rivière à l'Orme and the town of Kirkland's western border.

The site is within the borders of the Rivière à l'Orme Ecoforest Corridor, one of 10 ecoterritories the city of Montreal identified in 2004 as being ecologically significant.

The Rivière à l'Orme ecoterritory is home to an unspoiled mature forest, rare and endangered flora and fauna, and cedar groves that provide habitat for a population of white-tailed deer.

Montreal set aside \$36 million to acquire private lands within the most sensitive parts of these 10 ecoterritories in March 2004. The island council later expressed its support for Montreal's efforts by identifying these same ecoterritories as "heritage areas of collective interest."



Participants in a nature walk point at flying birds during their travels through Woods No. 3, part of the Rivière à l'Orme Ecoforest Corridor. Environmental advocates fear the old-growth trees will soon be cut down, as developers plan to build houses on the site.

Photograph by : ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE

Ste. Anne de Bellevue is one of three municipalities through which the Rivière à l'Orme, the island's only inland river, flows. The Rivière à l'Orme Ecoforest Corridor includes land in Pierrefonds, Beaconsfield and Ste. Anne de Bellevue.

While some island municipalities, like Beaconsfield, have welcomed Montreal's efforts to preserve ecologically valuable forests and wetlands in their communities, Tierney says Ste. Anne de Bellevue needs to grow and requires the tax dollars the new development would bring.

Besides, Tierney says, Ste. Anne is already plenty green, thank you, what with McGill University's Macdonald Campus Farm, the Morgan Arboretum and the Ecomuseum.

"This is not the middle of Montreal. This is not Verdun. It's already very, very green," Tierney said in an interview.

The land in question has been zoned residential for at least 25 years, Tierney notes, and last year the town council adopted a development plan for the area confirming that zoning.

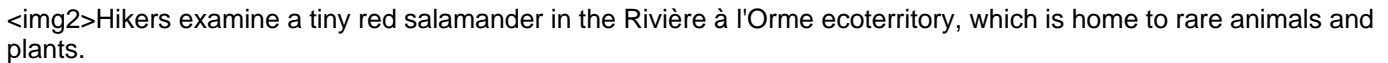
In March, the developer was granted the right to subdivide the land and West Island conservation groups fear the felling of trees is imminent.

"When Montreal decided to protect these green spaces, they did not have the force of law," Tierney said. "The only sure way Montreal can protect this land is to acquire it." The city of Montreal is trying to do just that.

Helen Fotopulos, the city of Montreal executive committee member responsible for parks and green spaces, said negotiations are under way with the landowners, Groupe Immobilier Grilli Inc. and Jean Houde Construction.

"I'm optimistic" Woods No. 3 can be saved, Fotopulos said.

"For us this is a priority and always has been. ... The discussions are going on and we hope to be able to have our great-grandchildren enjoy the fruits of this forest." But Tierney said Ste. Anne de Bellevue should not be expected to stand by while Montreal butts in, buys the land and deprives his municipality of future tax revenues.

Hikers examine a tiny red salamander in the Rivière à l'Orme ecoterritory, which is home to rare animals and plants.

Photograph by : ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE

He argues the cost of ecoterritories, including lost tax revenues, should be shared by taxpayers across the island.

"Ste. Anne is not a rich city," Tierney said.

"Maybe losing that money means not being able to meet our collective agreements or not bringing in programs like improved recycling and bicycle paths." The new housing development would be very eco-friendly, and include such features as geothermal heating and preservation of much of the tree canopy, he said.

But a canopy does not a forest make, and conservation groups like the Green Coalition say Ste. Anne de Bellevue needs to get its eco-priorities straight.

"This land is of the highest value in terms of ecology and how intact and undisturbed the forest is," said Daniel Oyama, of the Green Coalition, a non-profit advocacy group.

He wants to see cities like Ste. Anne change their development plans to reflect the need to preserve what little is left of unspoiled green spaces on the island of Montreal.

"They should get out of the woods and build in higher density on what's already been spoiled and leave the mature 100-year-old trees alone," Oyama said.

Meanwhile, Beaconsfield Mayor Bob Benedetti said he, too, is confident Woods No. 3 will be preserved.

Benedetti joined Fotopulos last year in Montreal's efforts to preserve part of Angell Woods, which also fall within the Rivière à l'Orme Ecoforest Corridor. But instead of demanding compensation money, Beaconsfield contributed \$600,000 toward buying the land from the developer who owned it.

"We were in a different situation," Benedetti said.

"Our citizens had made a clear decision they wanted to preserve that forest." Benedetti sits on a committee set up by the island council to deal with issues related to the Rivière à l'Orme Ecoforest Corridor. He said it's significant Tierney has agreed to meet with the committee next month.

Since Woods No. 3 is just across Highway 40 from Angell Woods, Benedetti is keenly interested in seeing it preserved, too.

"I subscribe to the dream of a huge West Island regional park that would go from Cap St. Jacques down to Angell Woods on both sides of the Rivière à l'Orme, with a green corridor over or under Highway 40," he said.

But realizing that dream may require significant financial help from the provincial government, Benedetti acknowledged.

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