

Cheval Blanc project foes renew efforts

Battle over Pierrefonds shore. Conservationists try to win over public

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While a proposed waterfront development in Pierrefonds remains in dispute, the public was given a first-hand look Saturday at the site that has caused all the fuss.

More than 150 people turned out for guided walks along the island of Montreal's last remaining natural shoreline across from the Cheval Blanc rapids.

In the rain, the visitors - an eclectic group of nature lovers from across the island - made their way along the unspoiled stretch of shoreline, avoiding poison ivy and taking note of the area's rich biodiversity.

They saw rare snakes and where the endangered map turtle nests in spring. The natural area covering about 14 hectares of forest, flood plain and shoreline is slated for development. A 300-plus condo complex and a linear park hugging the shoreline are proposed for the land.

But while time remains, Montreal-area conservationists - including the Green Coalition and the Cheval Blanc Committee, a local group - continue to fight it out in the court of public opinion.

"This is a place to be preserved and taken advantage of by all Montrealers," said David Fletcher, vice-president of Montreal's Green Coalition.

"We won't stop fighting until we have exhausted every avenue," he said, pointing out cork elms and downy agrimony, a delicate yellow-flowered plant that was once thought to be extinct in Quebec for the past 30 years.

Many Montrealers are unaware of what is at stake, he said. It will all be lost, he added, if the condo development proposed by Montreal developer Grilli Immobilier Inc. is allowed to go forward in the rare green space.

George Boutilier, a former city councillor for Pierrefonds who came out to walk in the rain and admire the nature, said he is committed to seeing the land protected.

"It's inappropriate" that a development project that would rob Montrealers of the Cheval Blanc waterfront land could be decided by Pierrefonds alone, Boutilier said. "This is a project bigger than Lafontaine Park."

While the city of Montreal has promised to reserve a band of land along the waterfront, he said, a linear park alone is not enough to save the natural area.

Meanwhile, the future of the development is unclear.

Johanne Savard, the city of Montreal's ombudsman, continues to review the land-swap deal in which the borough of Pierrefonds handed over the seven-hectare parcel Grilli is now trying to develop. In exchange, Grilli gave Pierrefonds a seven-hectare parcel of land it owned in a protected flood plain farther west and where no building is allowed.

The Green Coalition and the Cheval Blanc Committee, which filed a complaint to the ombudsman alleging irregularities, is hoping the land exchange that paved the way for the development in the first place will be overturned.

This week, a spokesperson for the ombudsman said a decision on the case will be made next month.

Until then, blueprints of the project continue to work their way through the approval process at the municipal level.

Bert Ward, a city councillor with the borough of Pierrefonds, said a date has been set to present Grilli's latest plan to the public. Ward said a special town planning committee meeting will be held Oct. 23 during which the public will get a look at Grilli's latest plan.

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