

City can't afford to lose any more green space

The Gazette

Published: Thursday, September 07, 2006

The scarcer the commodity, the more valuable it becomes. That alone makes green spaces in Montreal worth their weight in gold.

Of the roughly 50,000 hectares that make up the island of Montreal, about 47,000 have been developed - paved over, built up, landscaped or "tamed" in some fashion. This leaves a scant, and very precious, 3,000 hectares of unspoiled territory - wetlands, forests, meadows and the like.

Now, developers are planning to take a large bite of that 3,000 hectares in Pierrefonds' Cheval Blanc Rapids and turn them into yet more high-rises, townhouse condos and asphalt. That massive project should be either shelved permanently or dramatically downgraded.

For years, particularly at election time, Mayor Gerald Tremblay has paid much lip service about the need to protect the very few natural habitat spaces that still grace Montreal Island. But last week, he "qualified" all that went before.

"When I said 'What is green will stay green'," he clarified during question period at city hall, "I was mentioning the mountain (Mount Royal). ... That's what I meant. We are doing our best to save as many green spaces as possible."

We're a long, long way from "what is green will stay green," here.

Tremblay has to juggle competing interests, it's true. And in that ill-defined contest, economic development is constantly at loggerheads with environmental interests, and preserving some balance between the two is no easy task.

That said, though, several points come to mind. First is that Tremblay was elected twice, partly on his commitments to preserve Montreal's dwindling green areas and eco-territories. Second, economic interests are generally much more powerful than eco-groups, and any balancing of interests must take that lopsidedness into account. Third, there are limits to everything, including construction.

Finally, people don't live by bread alone. They also need - some more than others, but everyone to some degree - other forms of sustenance. As life keeps accelerating to keep up with the speed of the microchip, a simple walk in the woods takes on the allure of necessity, not just a whim - balm for the soul.

For Cheval Blanc, the economic case is straightforward: More housing means more property, school and other taxes reaped by the city, not to mention increased local economic activity. For Pierrefonds, it's low-hanging fruit that is almost impossible to resist.

But resist it should. Much of that land is a flood zone, and can't be built on. And the Green Coalition estimates the city could have bought the waterfront land the developer plans on building up for \$700,000 - a relatively modest sum.

There are other ways of encouraging investment. Fixing roads, improving bus and train connections and other unglamorous tasks would ensure Pierrefonds's long-term prosperity more efficiently than stacking up buildings indiscriminately.

Cheval Blanc is one of the largest swamplands left on the island of Montreal, host to some endangered species. That appeal, in this case, should tip more in favour of conservationists than developers.