

## Green virage a 'green mirage'

activists: Condos planned for ecoterritory. Land swapped to developers is home to rare species, coalition says

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Green-space conservationists say they've lost faith in the city of Montreal's promise to protect eight per cent of the island's land mass as undeveloped areas.

Nearly two years after Mayor Gerald Tremblay's administration introduced a policy on the protection of natural habitats, city hall has watered down a provincial target of conserving eight per cent of land mass and is ceding ecoterritory land for development, the Green Coalition contends.

An "ecoterritory" is an area designated by the city of 15 hectares or more of undeveloped green space containing significant biodiversity.

"What we were led to believe would be a green virage (change of direction) has turned into a green mirage," Green Coalition member David Fletcher said after city council's approval on Monday to swap city land for private land within the Cheval Blanc Rapids ecoterritory in Pierrefonds. The city traded land with a developer who plans a residential project.

A December 2005 Quebec cabinet decree forbids the sale or swapping of ecoterritory lands.

But the item came to city council this week only on a technicality, city executive committee member Helen Fotopulos said.

The island council, which is responsible for ecoterritories, has approved the removal of the municipal land from the ecoterritory, she said. But city council had approved the land swap earlier this year, before the island council voted on removing the land from the ecoterritory, so the swap had to go back to city council for a new vote.

Fletcher argues the city could have used the technicality to get out of the swap.

"You don't conserve something by developing it," he said.

Still, Fotopulos contends the city has ceded only five hectares of land that contains a former snow dump, a landfill and a small farmer's field in exchange for 15 hectares of ecologically valuable land from the developer.

The Green Coalition counters that 10 of the 15 hectares are wetlands protected by the province, so the developer wouldn't have been able to build on it anyway.

The group also says the land the city gave up for development is habitat to some species that are rare in Quebec, like the map turtle.

The group's frustration with the city goes beyond the swap.

The city first talked of protecting eight per cent of Montreal Island's land mass, Fletcher said. Then it said that eight per cent would break down as six per cent land mass and two per cent water, even though the idea of protecting water from development is laughable, he said. "You can't build condos on water."

This spring, city hall released a year-long review of its natural habitats policy that defined land mass as including shorelines and local parks.

Yet much of the island's shoreline is already protected by the province as flood plain or by the federal government as fish habitat, Fletcher said. And including neighbourhood parks in the conservation target is "cheating," he said.

Fotopulos, who says the city is negotiating to protect another 400 hectares on the island this year, insists there's no change.

"They send emails every other day saying we've cut our objectives," she said of the Green Coalition. "We have not diminished any targets."

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