

# Time to put urban sprawl in check

**RYAN YOUNG, The Gazette**

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Autumn has passed, and so, too, has much of the local harvest from nearby farms.

One of the things I love about living in Ste. Anne de Bellevue is that I can get up on Saturday mornings from June until October and take a leisurely walk over to our local farmers' market on the boardwalk.

There, I can purchase a watermelon, a butternut squash or a red pepper and know that these fruits and vegetables did not travel 3,000 kilometres to get here.

Most of the local farmers that sell their produce at the market are from off-island Ile Perrot or

St. Lazare, but at least one is based on the island of Montreal. Alison Hackney farms in Senneville on land that has been in her family for generations.

To my knowledge, she stands practically alone.

Why is it that unlike most European cities, where agricultural land close to cities has been carefully preserved for future generations, places like the West Island have haphazardly replaced some of the best agricultural land in North America with suburban developments, strip malls and asphalt.

In Germany or France, anyone in a city the size of Montreal can bike or take a short train ride into the countryside and visit local farms where they can do a good portion of their weekly grocery shopping.

Imagine being on a bicycle in downtown Montreal and trying to reach local farms.

It would be possible, but travel time would take up the better part of a day, and for many people, the trip would be an experience that would exceed or seriously challenge their physical capabilities.

Those of us on the westernmost end of the island are fortunate that there are farms like Hackney's, but we must not forget that the West Island is in the midst of a development boom that is slowly but surely rendering some of the most valuable agricultural land in Quebec - not to mention the equally important ecologically valuable wetlands and forests - into what ecological design guru John Todd calls "an impermeable surface."

No company in their right mind would squander a valuable resource that is relatively easy to maintain, close to distribution centres and easily transformed into value-added products, but our provincial and municipal governments are failing to take advantage of one of the most valuable substances in the world - arable, rich and porous soil.

It is a soil rich in nutrients and history. It is a soil that has been cultivated for hundreds of years, beginning with generations of aboriginal people.

This historical and practical resource must be preserved while it still holds some of the echoes of the natural jewel it once was.

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