

Green corridor facing fragmentation: Panel

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ST. LAZARE One of the municipality's largest remaining green corridors is threatened by uncontrolled development, according to a survey by a panel of the region's leading environmentalists.

The survey focussed on a roughly 4.5-kilometre corridor of ecologically sensitive land running from Cote St. Charles along Sandmere and its proposed extension, east to the Bordelais Bog. Parts fall within the 427 hectares recommended for protection from development in the Génivar greenspace audit released this past spring.

The panel was composed of Green Coalition VP David Fletcher, ethnobotanist Martina Hoft, cartographer Glenn Garner and Coalition board member Ryan Young. They were guided by a large contingent from St. Lazare's Committee for the Protection of the Environment (CPE).

Asked Friday why the municipality is not taking action to prevent further segmentation to the corridor, St. Lazare Mayor Paul Carzoli said, "you just cannot have bylaws unilaterally going into places like that.

"We cannot come up and try and protect green spaces that are deemed to be wetlands because we don't have the jurisdictional authority," Carzoli said.

Green Coalition VP David Fletcher denounced the mayor's statement outright, citing a legal battle in Quebec between developer Entreprises Sibeca Inc. and the municipality of Frelighsburg. Sibeca lost the case in the Supreme Court of Canada, setting a precedent for municipal environmental conservation.

"As I understand it, our democratic traditions mean that the people elected have a responsibility to the people that have elected them," Fletcher said.

"And yet they always choose to defy the people that have elected them when they want quality of life," the Green Coalition VP added. "Meanwhile the developers have an open door. You have no mandate to defend the interest of the developers."

The municipality is on the verge of approving the extension of Sandmere from the intersection of Place du Belvédère to Bordelais, an extension that would effectively split the corridor in two.

"It would be nice to have it done this year if we could by wintertime," Carzoli said, noting the cost and timeframe of the construction are not clear as no bids have been placed on the work.

"There's no resolutions that council have passed," Carzoli said.

The corridor contains a 10.71-hectare tract of ecologically valuable land with 80-year-old white pine hemlock according to the a wetland audit conducted by the consulting firm Génivar.

According to the CPE, the corridor is threatened by further segmentation from the Sunnybrook development, which has begun at the southwest corner of the sandpit and is under evaluation by the ministry of environment for an extension westward to Côte. St. Charles.

The CPE are insisting the project would further isolate the corridor from the forests and wetlands to the south, and neglect land identified by Genivar's wetland audit as ecologically sensitive. The area of the proposed development includes marsh lands and the chain fern, a species classified as susceptible to becoming endangered in Quebec.

CPE member Jonathan Maisonneuve said the municipality would be wasting a unique opportunity to preserve one of the widest green corridors in St. Lazare. "It's being fragmented so I'd say there's an urgency there where the process needs to be sped up a bit to contact the landowners, and to organize a group of citizens, the CPE, and workers from the municipality."

In an interview with the Hudson/St. Lazare Gazette in May, Carzoli agreed that it would be an interesting corridor to conserve. But, he added, "what you would want to do and what you can do are at times totally different."

Fletcher accused the municipality of ignoring the clear wishes of the majority.

"It's an absolutely dysfunctional system that we've got, and there really needs to be more input from the people that make huge investments in their properties and in the places they live," he said.