

Nature in need of nurture

Urban patchwork lacking green

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The picture of green space of Montreal from above is bleak. Faint patches of green peek out from a mass of grey, and urban sprawl spreads off the fringe of the island. From above, each green speck looks insignificant, but to the Green Coalition, an organization dedicated to preserving the last vestiges of green space on the island, some 42 specks represent a seemingly insurmountable challenge against the rampant development and political complacency that have brought the island to its current state.

At one such space: a tiny blue blip on the map off the western tip of the island, Green Coalition VP David Fletcher wades through the swampy shoreline of Lac Chérie, sifting through a water sample in search of mosquito larvae. The site was once a quarry dug up to pave a section of the Trans-Canada highway, attaching Montreal to the country's transportation artery, ceaselessly throbbing with the heavy drone commercial traffic. Beaver dams keep Lac Chérie's water level in check, and deer feed on thick vegetation under the faint and constant drone of some 81,000 vehicles that stream along the highway every day.

This summer, residents of the proposed les Floralies du lac development around Lac Chérie filled the town hall against a proposal that would see part of the lake filled with land to make room for 529 condominiums, senior units and houses. A concept drawing of the condominiums looks like a resort tucked away in the quiet folds of suburbia.

A group of citizens, les Floralies du lac, is impatiently waiting for a representative from the ministry of oceans and fisheries, who is expected to see if the lake's fish would place the area under federal jurisdiction, effectively preventing the condominium development from going forward.

And Lac Chérie, this one blip of green space among a patchwork of Montreal's remnants, is only a fragment of the Green Coalition's grander vision, a mosaic of green spaces both on and off the island that would form the Montreal Archipelago Ecological Park, a national park in the province's urban core.

Fifty groups fighting to conserve their local space, each in varying degrees of peril, have given their full backing to the coalition's national park proposal, which is set for implementation in 2010.

"It's a desperate situation [...] and we've got to act quickly," Fletcher said last week at the launching of the proposal, which has gained political backing from recently elected NDP star MP Thomas Mulcair, Green Party leader Scott McKay and a number of agglomeration council members.

Mulcair was quick to dispel any rifts in the project's unity as Vaudreuil-Soulanges NDP candidate Bert Merkgraf said municipalities have been coping with environmental concerns quite well on their own.

"We have to move away from the idea that municipalities could individually bring a project this large to fruition," Mulcair said. And the project is large. It cradles some 100 sites within a 50-kilometre radius spanning from Mirabel to the U.S. border, from Suroît to Sorel. Most sites were identified by GPS, the coordinates of which were put into a Google Earth registry leading up to the project's launch.

The coalition is quick to point out the sharp discrepancy between Montreal and other major Canadian cities. Montreal falls last in a list of fourteen Canadian cities per capita of green space, according to the coalition, as just over three per cent of the island's territory is protected natural space. The surrounding areas aren't doing much better as Laval only has 0.78 percent of its space conserved and the Montérégie an equally low 3.69 per cent.

The island's numbers pale in comparison to other Canadian cities and provinces: Toronto has been staunchly protecting its ravine ecosystem since 1954 and Ontario established a 720,000 hectare green belt in 2005; British Columbia has gone even further, protecting five million hectares of agricultural land and green belts, and Vancouver's belt is unanimously hailed as the model for all North American cities.

While the area for the project represents only one per cent of the area of Quebec, it houses 50 per cent of the province's population and contains two of the country's fastest developing regions: Mirabel and Vaudreuil-Soulanges.

"Most of it's [...] targeted for development," Fletcher said. "It's a desperate situation [...] and we've got to act quickly."

The project was moving through provincial legislation well until Mulcair was thrown out of his position as the Liberal environment minister over his firm stance on protecting Mount Orford from development, but the Green Coalition revitalized the project last week, and over the voice of Mulcair, Green Party leader McKay lends the park proposal his unabashed support.

"This project merits to be taken off the shelf by the Quebec government," McKay said. "It's also time that our government exercises good stewardship in the environmental sector and respects the treaties that have been signed and supported by the national assembly."

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity was signed under Premier Jean Charest—then head of the Federal Progressive Conservative party—and the federal environment minister in 1992 and is a binding document that would require the government to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss in the region.

According to a document by the Ministry of Sustainable Development, Environment and Parks, 383 plant species are vulnerable or at risk and 19 green spaces are in peril.

One of the project's main concerns is Laval mayor Gilles Vaillancourt's intention of extending Highway 440 through Ste-Dorothée to Île Bizard and cross into the West Island to connect to the Trans Canada. The proposed extension would run through the Bois de L'Île Bizard and through developed residential areas.

"If they put it in, it will give trucks a greater incentive to come onto the island," Fletcher said, "If there is an easy flow route it will come to congested again. [...] It's a bridge to nowhere."

In Pierrefonds, the borough council has approved the first phase of a controversial waterfront development that would see 4,500 units built over wetlands, forests and nesting grounds for migratory birds.

"If these areas are not saved, all the plant and animal species that live there will not be saved," Fletcher said.

Like any mosaic, the fragmented green spaces on and off the island of Montreal each tell a story. Heated battles between citizens, municipalities and developers rage on a daily basis, and by knitting each of these spaces into one ecological vision, the Green Coalition intend to preserve the mosaic as a united whole.

"It's going to be a difficult situation to coordinate," Fletcher admits. "But we have ways to do it."

APAW Association for the Protection of Angell Woods:

Space: It is about 100 hectares and located next to Baie D'Urfé industrial park.

Status: Is zoned for residential and industrial development. Is a possible space for a link between Highway 20 and Highway 40. 22 hectares have been bought and will be protected.

Arboretum Morgan:

Space: It is 245 hectares and is located in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue on McGill's campus.

Status: It is protected by McGill University.

Citoyens Pour une Qualite de Vie:

Space: Dorval, mainly near Pierre Elliot Trudeau Airport.

Status: Is afflicted by noise, air, water and soil pollution from Trudeau.

Comité Écologique du Grand Montréal:

Space: Various eco-spaces in Urban zones.

Status: Last big project of restoring and protecting Parc Marcil Laurin completed.

CRE Montreal:

Space: Montreal. Urgently focusing on Rene-Masson Park in Rivière-des-Prairies.

Status: Borough officials plan to build offices over the René-Masson Park.

Les amis de Meadowbrook:

Space: Meadow Brook Golf Course off of Côte St-Luc Road,

Status: In a struggle to keep the space green and not to be developed.

Patrimoine Naturel Île des Sœurs:

Space: Le Domaine Saint-Paul, the official forest area on Nun's Island.

Status: Constant battle to keep the to the space undeveloped.

Falaise St. Jacques:

Space: Heavily wooded space south of St-Jacques street in NDG, North of the Highway 20.

Status: Is threatened by future plans to improve the Turcot Interchange.

Rapides du Cheval Blanc Ecoterritory:

Space: A seven-hectare natural waterfront serving as a floodplain and nesting ground for migratory birds.

Status: In January this year, the Pierrefonds/Roxboro borough council passed a bylaw accepting developer Grilli Immobilier's construction of 251 housing units. The council passed the bylaw in exchange for a piece of land owned by Grilli, but the swap has infuriated residents because the area donated consists of wetlands that cannot be developed upon. The council will be converting the space into a municipal park.

Mount Royal:

Space: Consisting of three peaks, the highest reaching 764 feet, Mount Royal is one of the island's largest remaining green spaces.

Status: The city is spending millions of dollars to enhance Mount Royal, and the provincial government has protected the mountain as a historical and patrimonial site. Although no building in Montreal can be higher than the mountain, several proposed developments are under scrutiny as they threaten to obstruct the view of the mountain.