

Mending a broken city

BY PEGGY CURRAN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 28, 2013



It will take more than a mayor — no matter how good and smart he or she may be — to fix the city's broken political engine. And it will take more than the belief that our elected officials are honest and true, as important as that is, to pull this city out of the doldrums and restore civic pride when Montrealers head to the polls on Nov. 3.

Photograph by: Dario Ayala, The Gazette

MONTREAL - This time, no one in Montreal is ignoring the pachyderm in the room — the hulk with the cash stuffed in his socks. Sadly, that means just about everything else, from decrepit bridges and flashy art projects to curbside composting, affordable housing and walkable neighbourhoods, is getting the squeeze.

Corruption is, and has to be, the six-tonne question in the municipal election campaign.

In the space of seven months, two mayors have resigned in denial and disgrace. Testimony at the Charbonneau inquiry continues to reveal a tangle of bribery, skulduggery and deceit involving politicians, civil servants, engineering and construction contractors and party fundraisers.

Rooting out the rot, transforming a corrosive political culture and setting up roadblocks to thwart Mob influence and dirty dealings are absolute must-dos for Montreal's next mayor and administration.

"The first job of the next mayor will be to restore citizens' confidence, by showing irreproachable integrity, but also with leadership in identifying how contracts are awarded in the central city, and the boroughs," said Michel Leblanc, president of the Montreal Board of Trade. "Confidence is fragile. Citizens don't have much respect for municipal politicians right now."

"Corruption has to be an essential part of the discussion, from a democratic, but also an economic, point of view," said Yves Bellavance, coordinator of the Coalition montréalaise des Tables de quartier, whose group of 29 neighbourhood associations prod civic officials for local improvements and participatory government.

"For years now, we've been told there is no money for anything, only to discover some people have been putting three per cent in their pockets. Lack of public accountability is a serious problem."

Yet it will take more than a mayor — no matter how good, smart and clean he or she may be — to fix the city's broken political engine.

And it will take more than the belief that our elected officials are honest and true, as important as that is, to pull this city out of the doldrums and make Montrealers proud again.

The trick is to find a way to get some of those other concerns on the agenda as mayoralty candidates emerge and set their priorities.

From the slopes of Mount Royal to the depths of our corroded waterworks, from the need to streamline bloated government structures to getting a handle on the burgeoning costs of pensions and benefits for city workers, from the flight of young families to the suburbs and fears of older anglos fed up with a renewal of contrived language tensions to the plight of the poor and homeless in the city's inner core, Montreal's politicians would have their work cut out for them even if there wasn't a desperate need to clean house.

Add the desire for innovations that are exhilarating, ideas that push Montreal into the spotlight for a good reason, and the man or woman who would be mayor will need vision, imagination and superior juggling skills.

Issues, we have issues.

"Like all Montrealers, we are very concerned about the impact of recent revelations regarding city governance on the development of Montreal," cautions an eclectic coalition of citizens' groups, unions and non-governmental organizations such as the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre, Culture Montreal, Heritage Montreal, the Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU) and the Coalition

montréalaise des Tables de quartier.

In an open letter this month titled *Le Montréal que nous voulons/A People's Montreal*, the coalition summoned candidates for mayor and council to make the city more democratic while emphasizing culture, the environment, social and economic development and urban planning.

Bellavance is used to having one big issue dominate during a Montreal election campaign. "In the last election, the water-meter scandal had already broken and ethics took centre stage, so discussion of poverty, environment were overlooked."

But he said Montreal can't afford to keep putting off policy and strategic planning decisions. "We must talk about corruption, but we also have to ask what kind of city we want — and take steps to make it happen."

The A People's Montreal coalition spent a year coming up with ideas on which their diverse groups found common cause. Their wish list for the city during the next four years includes building 22,500 social housing units; increasing the number of reserved bus lanes and building more bike paths; ensuring access to such basic services as health centres, schools, daycares and small shops in all neighbourhoods; encouraging mixed-use urban development to help encourage local job creation; and recognizing the arts, culture and heritage as vital elements for a good quality of life.

"Thirty per cent of Montrealers live in poverty. That is one person in three," said Bellavance, who would like to see the next administration make tackling poverty a key part of its mission. "Montreal needs to be a city for everyone, no matter where you live or how much money you have, whether you are an immigrant or speak French or English. Everyone deserves a quality of life."

Bellavance suggested one way to do that would be by acquiring land and setting it aside for affordable housing initiatives instead of leaving the field open to private developers. "It's not by building little condos that people who have left are going to come back to the city."

During the last decade, access to affordable housing has become a crucial issue, particularly for the poor, seniors and families with young children, said Marie-José Corriveau, a FRAPRU organizer. In recent weeks, social housing activists from FRAPRU have staged a noisy protest at mayoralty candidate Denis Coderre's campaign launch and camped on land in St-Henri slated for a condo project in an effort to bring attention to the poor quality and soaring cost of rental units in Montreal.

"Older stock apartments are in worse and worse state of repair, with little will or pressure by the city administration to compel landlords to heed the building code." Corriveau also said the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment has climbed by roughly \$200 since 2001, from \$534 to \$725, with 90 per cent of the city's poorest households spending more than half their income on rent.

With landlords driving the bus, "families often have trouble renting a place if they have children. All the

compromises have been made to benefit the developers,” she said.

Bellavance said politicians have a habit of unveiling snazzy idealized housing projects — such as the Griffintown development, or the Quartier Bonaventure idea touted by Projet Montréal’s Richard Bergeron — instead of making sure existing neighbourhoods have the schools, daycare centres, grocery store, small businesses and jobs they need to thrive.

Shannon Franssen of Solidarité St-Henri said mixed-use neighbourhoods are crucial to Montreal’s future. “What we don’t want is a forest of condos surrounded by industrial zones.”

Meanwhile, Montreal’s business community has been drafting its own to-do list for Montreal politicians.

Leblanc said the Board of Trade wants to hear what candidates plan to do to help small businesses get their mojo back.

Leblanc has been worrying about the weakening of shopping arteries such as St-Laurent Blvd., Mont Royal Ave. and Fleury St., which have suffered the effects of last year’s student protests and from borough policies such as strict parking regulations and one-way streets designed to limit car traffic in favour of bikes and pedestrians. He singled out the Plateau, saying local officials have brushed aside merchants’ complaints. “The implication is that it’s not important that they go out of business.”

Leblanc argued it’s difficult to create and maintain a dynamic street life “if you make it difficult for people to go to a restaurant for dinner or visit that shop.”

Strengthening the streetscape is vital to Montreal’s future, Leblanc said, casting an eye both to deserted city cores south of the border and across the river, where the exodus of young families “created opportunities” for megamalls such as Carrefour Laval and the Dix30 on the South Shore.

“There are movie theatres, concert venues and shops where there used to be nothing. Meanwhile, city restaurants are having difficulty getting people to come to them,” he said. “It’s a challenge that must be wrestled with. ... Many of these streets are fragile. I have nothing against places like Dix30. But don’t weaken the city core to allow it to happen.”

Business leaders are also anxious to hear what the candidates have to say about improving public transit.

“There are too many projects and not enough money,” Leblanc said, reciting proposals for métro extensions, an express bus on Pie IX Blvd., a train to the airport, a light train on the new Champlain Bridge and a tramway.

“We have to choose, and in what order,” he said, noting the Board of Trade would give priority to extending the métro’s Blue Line to the east, the Pie IX express bus and adding two more stations on the Orange Line on Montreal Island heading north toward Laval.

“My dream candidate would have a vision informed by the realization that we live in an urban ecosystem,” said Peter Stoett, a professor of political science at Concordia University, where he is the director of the Loyola Sustainability Research Centre.

“This involves not just the pursuit of better water quality and waste management, but the active promotion — within feasible fiscal limits — of the biodiversity on the island; use of river space to promote physical and mental health; more greening of public spaces (trees, rooftop gardens); public events celebrating biodiversity and local wildlife.”

“Montreal needs a long-term climate change adaptation strategy, in addition to curbing greenhouse gas emissions in the city, and especially by city services,” he said. “Montreal has good relative food security, but we could also do more to promote urban agriculture, small and large-scale, infusing this with early childhood education.”

Can anything positive come out of the corruption crisis that has beset Montreal city hall during the last year?

For Franssen, part of the group that crafted the A People’s Montreal open letter, it would lead to a radical transformation in the way the city operates, making it more open, accountable and democratic.

Franssen said hearings on such projects as the Turcot Interchange, the McGill University Health Centre and the Canada Malting development on the Lachine Canal showed the city is learning to listen — but has a way to go before consultations truly reflect what the people who live in the district said they want.

“Often, the process is used to push through a policy and shield the politicians from criticism,” she said. “If we are going to talk about real participatory democracy, consultations need to have more teeth and recommendations have to be given the weight to be followed.”

Bellavance said he’d begun to sense a shift in political attitudes, partly generational, even before Gérald Tremblay resigned as Montreal’s mayor last fall, which led to the formation of the coalition administration currently in place. “There’s been an evolution, a recognition that citizens need to be part of the conversation. It’s not the Drapeau era anymore.”

He predicts some type of coalition at city hall is here to stay. “It’s inevitable, I think. Not to accept it would be suicidal.”

There is, however, one factor the politicians can’t control, no matter how compelling their ideas are or how well they understand what’s at stake in this election.

“The big question is whether people will go out and vote,” said Bellavance, who worries Montrealers are so jaded they will stay home on Nov. 3.

In 2009, with the stink of the \$355.8-million water meter contract already heavy in the air, just under 40 per cent of Montrealers — 433,937 of 1,100,208 eligible voters — went to the polls, rewarding Tremblay with a third mandate. In a by-election only days after Tremblay quit last fall, Vision Montreal's Cindy Leclerc defeated Union Montreal's Nino Colavecchio by 99 votes (1,884 to 1,785). Voter turnout in that byelection was 21 per cent.

"We don't tell people how to vote, but we are urging them to get out and make a choice," Bellavance said.

It's not enough for Montreal's next mayor and council to have strong ideas. They need to be able to carry them through.

"We can't do everything in one year, or four years, but you have to start somewhere," Bellavance said.

"The city needs to make choices, and to lobby other levels of government. That means having the leadership to persuade those other governments, which historically, no matter what party was in power, have tended to favour the suburbs over Montreal."

"One of the revelations of the Charbonneau hearings has been the danger which arises when decisions are left to consultants, or when the mayor isn't aware of what is going on," Leblanc said. "So one of the first things we want to know is how the candidates see the role of the mayor."

For people in the business community, there's also a sense of urgency, a need to polish the city's reputation with a bold, beautiful and striking gesture.

"The next mayor must restore Montreal's image," Leblanc said. One way to do that would be to focus on the city's 375th anniversary in 2017, which coincides with the 50th anniversary of Expo 67. One idea floating around would be to invite countries that had pavilions at Expo to donate an art work, to be placed at important locations around the city.

"This is important for the pride of Montrealers, but also for people in other parts of Quebec and the rest of Canada," Leblanc said.

"So that is something I want to hear from the people who want to be mayor. What is their dream?"

pcurran@montrealgazette.com

Twitter: [peggylcurran](#)



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