

Projet de réseau électrique métropolitain de
transport collectif

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The Proposed Réseau électrique métropolitain Commuter Train:

Why it must be Stopped and Completely Scrapped

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Introduction

The Réseau électrique métropolitain (REM) commuter train, in its planning and construction, if approved, would be an environmental and financial disaster. It is for these reasons that the train, which would serve passengers in the South Shore, Montreal, and Two Mountains area must be opposed.

Many reject this \$5.5 billion investment - \$3 billion of pension funds from the Caisse du Depots and \$2.5 billion from the provincial and federal governments, and they are concerned that, if built, the REM will result in the wholesale destruction of wilderness, wetlands, green space, and farm land on the South Shore and Montreal's West Island; lead to an increase in urban sprawl; and be a complete and veritable money pit that generations of Quebeckers will be paying for and have to live with.

The REM project appears to be a fait accompli as it has the full support of the Quebec Liberal provincial government under Premier Couillard, the City of Montreal under the leadership of Mayor Denis Coderre, and a host of mayors and councils along its 67 kilometer route. I and many others are calling for the REM plan and hearings to be scrapped so that alternatives to it are fully studied and costed and that the various plans be made public in full detail. We as citizens and taxpayers are owed that as sign of respect.

Any plan that will create the basis for public transit service for the present and future, must be fully studied and done in a public fashion so that no special interest groups hold sway and control the process; that the public has input on the development of the plans before any BAPE hearings are held; and that when the plans are developed, that they be subject to National Assembly hearings. This may take time, but if we get it right, we will have a public transit system that is efficient, cost effective, and one that we can all be proud of.

The Alternatives to the REM

As noted, the REM must be put on permanent suspension so that alternatives are properly studied and compared with the REM.

There are two clear options:

- 1) Invest in the two existing commuter rail systems that serve Montreal's West Island. Money can be directed for the purchase of locomotives and passenger cars to increase the frequency of service and the number of passengers that can be carried daily; for the building of more track, stations, and infrastructure; and for improvements to local bus service to bring people to and from the train stations and thus make it attractive for people to use public transit and leave their cars at home.
- 2) Implement the plan developed by Option Transport Durable that calls for extending the STM's Blue Line by three stations (the federal government, via its plan for infrastructure investment in the country's major cities, has promised to help fund this extension) and to construct seven tramway lines along major roads in Montreal that can easily be accessed by hundreds of thousands of people. This plan would cost \$5.5 billion and carry three times the number of passengers that the REM proposes to carry daily. It would allow for buses to be shifted to other areas, make it easier for people leave their cars at home, and connect the tramways with Metro stations.

A third option is to combine improvements to the existing commuter rail lines and the Option Transport Durable proposal so that we optimize existing public transit system and connect the new systems so that they are completely integrated. It must be stressed that the REM project, through governments, organizations, and special and vested interests backing it, is most definitely being rushed and rammed upon the public as a veritable *fait accompli*, with the media eagerly cheering it on and speaking about it as if it has already been approved and that the construction crews are just waiting for the order to start the work.

Far worse, the REM plan is being presented as the sole solution to improve public transit in the Greater Montreal Area, particularly in regards to commuter rail systems and is claimed to be a "green" project that is good for the environment because it will be powered by electricity.

Sadly, the Caisse plan, backed by the provincial government and the City of Montreal, refuses to consider the alternatives. This is not acceptable. If there is to be an upgrade to commuter rail and public transportation service for the Greater Montreal Area, it must be thoroughly studied, reviewed, and costed so that a plan is implemented to meet transportation needs for the next few decades. The project does not have to be rushed and sadly the BAPE, through provincial government pressure, has fast-tracked the hearing process.

When proper studies through a neutral body examining them are done, the public will know which solution or solutions offer the best value for the taxpayer dollar. It is crystal clear that the proposed REM proposal leaves many questions unanswered, is full of unknowns, and is incomplete. This is not a proper way for governments to develop public transit systems, nor a respectful way to spend taxpayer dollars.

Money spent by the Caisse is also public money and they do not have *carte blanche* to whatever they want with it. The provincial government has an obligation to ensure that our tax dollars are spent wisely, but as we are seeing, Premier Couillard and Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre spend money willy-nilly and have no respect for the taxpayer.

The Environmental Impact of the REM: A Wholesale

Destruction of Wilderness and Biodiversity

A few months ago the BAPE released a study on the REM which confirmed that the project would result in the massive destruction of large chunks of farmland, green space, wilderness, and wetlands to construct the track, infrastructure, stations, and parking lots for commuters on the South Shore and Montreal. The study was telling and the construction of the REM will wipe out entire ecosystems and severely impact many; cause endangered species to either go extinct locally or permanently; eliminate green spaces and wilderness areas that provide people with a connection to nature; increase urban sprawl with the development of housing, low-density businesses complete with large parking lots, and the construction of new roads – major arteries and smaller roads. Building the REM not only increases urban sprawl, but in one fell swoop, ensures that Montreal will be unable to meet its goal of preserving 10 percent of the island as wilderness.

This suits Mayor Coderre just fine as he wants to destroy 185 hectares at L'Anse a l'Orme to build over 5,500 homes, and the provincial government, which a few years ago sold large areas of wilderness that it owned in L'Anse a l'Orme for residential and commercial development. These areas contained marshes and forests and were homes to flora and fauna that was just hanging on. With the REM, much of Montreal's remaining biodiversity will be doomed and thus destroyed. This is unacceptable when we see how important it is to protect wilderness and biodiversity. This project, through the construction of track, stations, parking lots, and a variety of supporting infrastructure, will eliminate 75 percent plus of the wilderness and green space in the West Island that must be preserved and protected to ensure the immediate and long-term survival of wildlife – local, migratory birds and butterflies, and threatened and endangered species; various forests that ensure the survival of many species of animals, plants, and insects that are just hanging on and have nowhere else to go; and wetlands that provide homes for many species of birds, including endangered birds such as the Least Bittern and other waterfowl with the areas in Montreal being their northern limits. Local bat species will also lose habitat, and they are only now recovering the disastrous white nose syndrome that has decimated their populations. Many birds will lose nesting areas, be they rare and solitary species or communal species such as crows that depend on forests and forested areas to roost at night.

Sadly wetlands all over southern Quebec are rapidly being lost to rapacious and unregulated development and once lost, are gone forever. We have an obligation to protect all the remaining wetlands in the Greater Montreal Region from destruction by development and the REM will be a death sentence for vast sections of wetlands on the South Shore and in Montreal. The wetlands in the L'Anse a l'Orme area and Technoparc Montreal lands will be among the first to be lost as REM stations are planned for both of these areas.

All governments have an obligation to ensure the protection of all remaining green spaces, wilderness, and farm lands in the Greater Montreal Area. We need laws and regulations that will only permit development on brown fields (10 percent of Montreal), low-density commercial and industrial sprawl (a minimum of 20 percent of the Island of Montreal), and on parking lots – there are way too many of them and they are quite large. The Sierra Club of Quebec publicly

demanding that a moratorium on the development of green space, wilderness, and farmland be put into effect now. If the REM plan is approved, it will be an additional strike against the continued existence of such lands and biodiversity in the Greater Montreal Area.

The REM will increase urban sprawl and the building of new roads to allow for new housing developments in undeveloped areas adjacent to the proposed track as it being placed along areas of the West Island and South Shore where there are few passengers. For the REM to succeed financially it needs passengers and a captive market to secure them from. Thus the REM, as planned, is situated in areas that will have to be developed as opposed to areas where there are large existing populations. This is quite deliberate and blatant.

The REM proposal is a complete disaster for the green space, wilderness, local agriculture, and biodiversity – this is why it is essential that alternatives be thoroughly examined and the REM plan be placed on a permanent hiatus.

An Assortment of Argument Against the REM

The following arguments are among the many that opponents of the REM are discussing at BAPE hearings and in the media to alert the public on the dangers of the proposed train system.

- The REM essentially exclusively serves neighbourhoods with low population densities. Public transportation systems work best when linked to well established and growing communities. Short distances to reach the nearest stations are essential to ensure high ridership levels, as well as solid public transit (buses) to reach them.
- The REM does not serve the low-income neighbourhoods where public transit ridership numbers are the highest. STM ridership maps clearly demonstrate that the busiest bus routes are concentrated in areas East End Montreal. It would not serve these areas and thus not reduce the pressure on any of the major bus lines in Montreal.
- The REM is barely connected to the current system of public transit and it must be connected with other portions of the public transit network, particularly the Metro. In Phase 1 of the REM, only one REM-metro link is planned, linking it to the Bonaventure station. Although future connections are considered for the McGill and Édouard-Montpetit stations in a potential Phase 2 - this is insufficient. The REM design should have included these connections.
- The REM, as noted, promotes the growth of urban sprawl. Via its four new parking lots to attract passenger - including one for 3,000 vehicles at the Rive-Sud station, it encourages people to still use their cars. And, of course, the REM requires housing development and multiple car households around many of its stations, which will destroy green space, wilderness, and farmland.
- The REM completely disrespects sound urban planning, and it must stressed that it was developed in camera (behind closed doors) with no regard for existing urban development and land use plans, or ongoing planning initiatives being considered by regional transport agencies.

- The REM blocks the expansion of other modes of public transit. The REM will take over the Mount Royal train tunnel for its exclusive use. This is a negative because the automated (driver-less) technology used by its rail system cannot be shared with other public transit agencies. This will impact commuters who use the Train de l'Est (the AMT's Mascouche line), who will be required to transfer to the REM to get downtown. The REM will also prevent the creation of an effective inter-city train link between Montreal and Quebec City. It will interfere with VIA Rail's plans for a high frequency train from Toronto to Quebec City, which would pass under Mount Royal.
- The REM will create serious uncertainty about local transit management and fares. It is not clear who will manage the REM or which institution will oversee its operations. The new agency, the ARMT (Agence Régionale de Transport Métropolitain) is not yet operational and there are concerns about how fares will be integrated with other public transit options (metro and buses). Will the REM increase fares for all transit users in the metropolitan region, even if they do not benefit from any improvement in service? This remains a serious unknown and the REM should not be used as a cash cow for the Caisse and provincial government to milk taxpayers to recover anticipated losses.
- The REM will increase greenhouse gas emissions. A recently released impact study estimated that the REM would cause an annual decrease of 17,000 tons in greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) as the train would replace diesel buses on the Champlain Bridge. But the urban sprawl caused by the REM's construction would increase emissions of GHGs by significant levels.

Moreover, the Caisse has so far refused to evaluate this aspect of their project. The provincial ministry of the environment asked the Caisse to evaluate the GHG emissions that would be generated by the REM's construction, but the Caisse refused to provide this information. This speaks volumes about the Caisse and shows absolutely no respect the environment and the people who have to live with the consequences.

- The REM is an abuse of taxpayer dollars. Through the sale of public infrastructure as proposed by the project, it will require at least \$2.5 billion of public funds to succeed. It will also benefit from the takeover of public assets, including the Two Mountains train line and the train tunnel running through Mount Royal. The Caisse is also expected to benefit from important public assets that it could sell to third parties to increase the return on its investment, which is being done with public funds. This is unacceptable as the people of Quebec are being fleeced. We have commuter train infrastructure systems in place that needs to be supported and upgraded to provide efficient service.
- The REM planners are engaged in cognitive dissonance and deliberate ignorance in terms of refusing to accept impact studies. At least six Quebec government ministries have clearly pronounced that the REM's impact study is incomplete and/or inadmissible. In any other context, such disregard would have delayed and suspended the evaluation process. But the provincial government wants the REM project to proceed and rapidly. In

fact, the Couillard government ratified a bill in the National Assembly to fast-track the hearings and thus limit public participation and opposition scrutiny. The REM is essentially a fait accompli and is clearly linked to corruption on a massive scale. We have to invoke *cui bono* on the project and the answers are not pretty and quite troubling.

Conclusion

It's clear that the REM has been ill-planned and ill-thought and that it is essential for alternatives to be studied. We know that its construction will have a negative impact on wilderness, green space, farm land, and biodiversity, and this cannot be permitted. We also know that the many reasons for opposing the REM fully demonstrate that proceeding with the initiative shall result in a non-stop bleeding of public funds to maintain a bad investment and that rejecting the REM is the wise and correct course of action.

We can stop the REM project dead in its tracks, and by doing so, establish a committee to do a full and proper study of the REM and its alternatives. Such an action would create the basis for an efficient public transit system that would easily meet the needs of the Greater Montreal Area for several generations. We can easily take the best elements from San Francisco and the Bay Area, the Greater New York City area, Greater Boston, and Greater Toronto in terms of public transportation systems. This is a logical move and all win by it. There is no reason to be hasty or kowtow to vested interests that include the provincial government, the Caisse, Bombardier, and the construction companies that are too friendly with the Liberal Party of Quebec and its leadership.