



Brief for BAPE hearings on the Réseau électrique métropolitain (REM)

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Citizens Climate Lobby/Lobby Climatique des Citoyens

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Dear Commissioners,

As a resident of East Montreal, I watch with alarm the steps taken by the Caisse de Dépôt and the provincial government to install the Réseau Électrique Métropolitain (R.E.M.) on the west end of the island of Montréal. Please accept the following arguments as my contribution to the discussion about the project's merits.

Sincerely,
Dr. Laurel Thompson

1. The R.E.M. will not fulfill the 2008 Transportation Plan's Promise to Address the Needs of East Montreal

East Montreal is an anomaly on the island. Unlike older or more affluent parts of the city, it did not begin with tramways, buses, bicycles, cars, and then graduate to the Metro. It began with cars and trucks whose infrastructure needs shaped its development into a vast region full of broad boulevards, avenues, highways and shopping plazas. However, unlike the West Island which was also shaped by cars, East Montreal's avenues and highways serve the needs of industry and commerce first and residents only second or third. East Montreal is where immigrants and poor families go. Rent is cheaper there on account of the fact that there are few transportation options. Several very polluting industries are located there, and immigrants are less likely to complain about substandard housing.

Take a look at a map of the distribution of poverty in Montreal and you will see that the greatest density of low-income families is on the eastern half of the island. This is the part of Montreal with high population density per square mile. It is also the part with very high ridership for public transportation, if they can find it.

2. Transit Access Deficit for Commuters

However, high ridership does not mean transit is abundant or that people arrive to work on time. Day after day, overcrowded buses transport workers from Montreal North, Bourassa, Saint-Laurent to the Henri Bourassa or Saint-Michel Metro stations to go downtown. The buses must compete with thousands of cars weaving in and out, so sometimes there are accidents and movement is slow. Although reserved lanes for buses help, and express buses have fewer stops, having to share space with so many vehicles, many of whose movements are erratic, forces bus drivers to engage constantly in defensive driving. It would be much faster if they had their own right of way as in LRT or Rapid Bus Transit.

3. Transit Access Deficit for Local Networking

Within Saint-Michel, Montreal-Nord, Parc-Extension, and Hochelaga, the only way to get around is by car or bus. Neighbourhoods are car-oriented, so distances are not walkable and streets allow speeds that make being a pedestrian or bicyclist extremely dangerous. Bus service is dependable but not frequent, so long wait-times on busy roads are tedious and dangerous. Since many people have more than one job, car-ownership essential. Those who do not have access to cars are at a real disadvantage.

4. Social Housing and Transit Access are Key to Achieving Social Equity for East Montreal

No one expects immigrants from poorer countries to have many resources. One of the reasons for their coming here is to take advantage of the chances for self-improvement that were not available at home. But if we are going to accept large numbers of immigrants from poor countries, as well as look after local families who, for one reason or another, need social services, we also need to provide ways for them to improve their situation. That means social housing and public transit. Transit options, be it the Metro, buses, bicycles, sidewalks, light rail, or trams are the nerves of our city that carry the nutrients we need to survive and prosper. If we do not provide good transit options for people who are still struggling to make their way, Montreal becomes polarized between rich and poor with all the social problems that entails e.g. vandalism, rioting, looting.

A successful transportation network serves the urban context for which it is designed. Right now East Montreal is a car-friendly/transit desert because planners have not yet adopted ideas that shape land use patterns designed for the automobile into new formations built around low carbon. The ideas are out there — “complete” streets, congestion pricing, costed parking, traffic calming, transit-oriented development. What’s needed is the political will to use them in the East Montreal context.

The 2008 transportation plan included reserved and rapid bus lanes along Pie-IX and Henri Bourassa during rush hour to be used by articulated buses or trolleys. Bus rapid transit on Pie-IX (70,000 riders daily) was supposed to link the East End and downtown Montreal. There were plans to extend the Blue Line from Boulevard Saint-Michel first to Boulevard Pie-IX, then Saint-Léonard and Anjou with a forecast in ridership increase of 50%. The plan also mentioned the use of tolling to keep congestion at bay. But very few of these projects have yet to see the light of day. Reserved bus lanes on Henri Bourassa were installed a few years ago, But when tolls on bridges were suggested by the Ecofiscal Commission last year, the mayor rejected them. The Blue Line extension has been postponed indefinitely. Bus Rapid Transit on Pie-IX won’t begin until 2022. The expensive and slow Train de l’Est commuter train between Mascouche and downtown does not stop in East Montreal. If R.E.M. is built, we can expect further procrastination. The #48 and #49 on Boulevard Henri Bourassa will continue to struggle daily against a constant tide of automobiles on their way to Autoroute 19.

Urging people to walk, bicycle or use public transit makes no sense to residents of East Montreal. These options are not practical in the context of the car-filled highways and boulevards within which they have to live and it is insulting to expect otherwise. Until their circumstances start to resemble the circumstances of middle-class residents elsewhere on the island they are stranded. Obligated to travel in a space developed for automobiles and trucks, they can only stand and watch as solo drivers speed past them.

5. Return on Investment is Not the Goal of Transportation Planning

The current Minister of Transport has not said anything yet about R.E.M, but the previous one, Jacques Daoust, has said that, in his opinion, the project gives a quicker return on investment than the Blue Line extension (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/blue-line-extension-announcement-delayed-again>)

A good return on investment may be an appropriate goal for bankers and business people. But government officials have a responsibility to serve the people who elected them, and R.E.M. does nothing for the part of Montreal with the greatest need for transit, congestion control and the economic development they both bring. City leaders know the area needs more public transit, but they hesitate to embrace it. Their opposition to doing something about the number of cars and trucks on our roads reveals serious misunderstanding of the nature of 21st century

commerce. Perhaps when the city of Montreal wakes up and gets driving under control through the introduction of “complete” streets, traffic calming, congestion pricing, costed parking, East Montrealers can think about going green. In the meantime, citizens there are stuck in an outdated transportation scene.

If instead of conceiving projects as opportunities to get the quickest financial return on investment, they were conceived as opportunities to help communities develop themselves economically with jobs, businesses, community

Neither R.E.M. nor Montreal’s 2008 Transportation Plan Address the Needs of East Montreal

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