

15 April 2008

Brief

Presented to:

The City of Montreal

*Commission permanente du conseil municipal sur le
développement culturel et la qualité du milieu de vie*

Étude publique sur l'itinérance

Submitted By

GProjet
Genèse

4735 Côte-Ste-Catherine
Montréal, Québec,
H3W 1M1
(514) 738-2036

Project Genesis is a grassroots community organisation located in the culturally diverse neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges, an area in which over 40% of households live below the poverty line. Founded in 1977, Project Genesis has spent over 30 years working with low-income families and individuals, senior citizens and new immigrants. Based on the values of social justice, equality and empowerment, we offer both individual and community organising services, using an approach based on advocacy and community involvement.

In the past year, our volunteer-based Storefront service provided 8,437 in-person services and responded to over 12,750 requests for assistance over the telephone for problems related to housing, welfare, pensions, and access to health and social services. The majority of the people coming to the Storefront came specifically for problems related to housing, and interventions related to evictions this past year averaged more than one visit every day to our Storefront.

The City's strategy to prevent homelessness must ensure that individuals and families are able to pay their rent with enough money left over to live in dignity. In order to stem the growing tide of homelessness in Montreal, all levels of government must act proactively to protect those who are precariously housed, by which we mean all those who are repeatedly threatened with eviction, and all those who spend more than 30%, sometimes even more than 50%, of their income on rent.

It is in this spirit of prevention that we make the following recommendations to the members of the *Commission permanente du conseil municipal sur le développement culturel et la qualité du milieu de vie*.

Recommendation 1:

The City should use all of its political clout to advocate for a massive reinvestment into low-cost housing by the federal and provincial governments.

According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the average monthly rent for a 4 1/2 in our neighbourhood in 2007 was a staggering 804 dollars. This represents an increase of 52% percent since 2001. Coupled with the fact that incomes have not kept up with this increase it comes as no surprise to us that the Rental Board handled over 44,534 eviction cases last year. We have seen ample and unhappy proof that many families can simply no longer afford to pay their rent.

Housing is a fundamental human right. Yet, as our current context makes clear, the private market has proven itself unable to provide decent housing that people can afford. The federal and provincial governments stopped building low-cost housing in 1994 and the City of Montreal has suffered many of the disastrous consequences of this decision. According to Montreal's Municipal Housing Office, between 6,000 and 7,000 eligible families apply for low-cost housing every year, while only 2,000 units become available. The result: as of November 2007, 22,932 families are on the waiting list in Montreal, some of whom have waited for an apartment for ten years or more.

We have seen that people have a tendency to blame the City's Municipal Housing Office when their names slip further and further down the wait-list with every passing year. It would be more appropriate to target the federal and provincial government for not building new units to meet the growing need. However, this is difficult to do when the City of Montreal has remained strangely silent on the need to re-invest in low-cost housing.

The City of Montreal should maximize its leverage with the Province of Quebec to make the case for low-cost housing. Though co-ops and non-profit housing are important, only low-cost housing is fully accessible to low-income people who can only afford to pay 25% of their income on rent. The City of Montreal should ask the province to expand AccesLogis, the provincial program that currently funds the development of co-ops and non-profit housing, to include the construction of low-cost housing that could be used to benefit the families on the low-cost housing waiting list.

The City of Montreal should use any contact it has with the Federal Government to say loudly and clearly that, though funding shelters and transitional residences is necessary, the federal government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy will not combat homelessness in any long-term or useful way unless it

develops a comprehensive social housing program that includes re-investment in the construction of new low-cost housing units. And, as a member of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, the City should use this forum to convince other Canadian cities of the need for re-investment into low-cost housing.

As the level of government most directly touched by the problems of people who are precariously housed, the City has both a unique opportunity and a serious responsibility to advocate, on behalf of its residents for low-cost housing.

Recommendation 2:

The City should use the *Société d'habitation et de développement de Montreal* (SHDM) to build up its reserve of land, and it should use this land exclusively for the development of social housing or other projects that benefit the common good.

The SHDM must secure a reserve of land and dedicate it to the eventual development of social housing. Buying land now safeguards against the rising cost of real estate and ensures that when funds are made available for the development of social housing units, construction sites will still be available. As a concrete example, the northern sector of Côte-des-Neiges, Sector Namur-Jean-Talon, is currently home to light industry and several vacant lots. Buying some of this land before speculators swoop in means that the city will have a say in the development of this area. It is also essential that the City's reserve of land be used to the exclusive benefit of the public, meaning the development of social housing and other community assets such as parks or community centres. So-called affordable housing projects, such as AccesCondo will not respond to the needs of the area's residents, and so any residential development in this area must prioritise social housing.

Recommendation 3:

The City should ask the provincial government for sufficient funds to develop enough co-ops and non-profit housing (OSBLs) to meet the needs of the people of Montreal.

We are glad that in February 2008 the City Council passed a formal resolution asking the provincial government to renew AccesLogis. However, we are disappointed that, despite the magnitude of the need, the City only saw fit to ask for 800 supplemental units. At this rate the City of Montreal will not be able to meet its own promise to develop 5,000 new units of social housing between 2006 and 2009.

Recommendation 4:

The City should put a moratorium on the conversion of rooming houses. The City should protect rooming houses by setting up a fund to buy them and thus ensure that this form of housing remains available for those who require it.

Boarding houses are an important buffer against homelessness for many people and an important resource for people who are homeless. Placing a moratorium on their conversion will keep them from disappearing. To ensure the long-term protection of boarding houses, the City should set up a fund to buy boarding houses, removing them from the private market, and transfer them to non-profit organisations that can use them to meet the needs of marginalised sectors of the population.

Recommendation 5:

The City should vigorously enforce its own housing code to maintain the current private housing stock.

We see hundreds of individuals and families whose dwellings require urgent repairs and maintenance: vermin infestations, mould, water damage, lack of heating in the winter and broken fridges in the summer, to name but a few. Between 2003 and 2006 over twenty five percent of all health and safety complaints in Montreal concerned buildings in the borough of Côte-des-Neiges/Notre-Dame-de-Grace. This statistic demonstrates the gravity of the situation in our area and also testifies to the determination of this neighbourhood's residents to use all recourses at their disposal in order to improve their living conditions.

Unfortunately, we have seen that often people's living conditions do not improve, despite their complaints to the municipal inspectors and to the Rental Board. Because of the limited availability of truly affordable housing, especially for families, tenants are effectively held hostage in dwellings that are often unfit for habitation. We have witnessed a severe deterioration of the housing stock in our neighbourhood, coupled with rapidly increasing rents. In order to improve the living conditions of the precariously housed, the City must enforce its own housing code. In order to do this we recommend that

- The City allocate more human and financial resources to the inspection department to allow for faster service and improved performance
- The City streamline the process for making a complaint so that more tenants are able to use the service. For example, we recommend that the

City eliminate the waiting periods which are generally applied before the municipal inspectors come to inspect a building.

- The increased use of emergency funds to carry out emergency repairs in which case the City later bills the recalcitrant landlords.
- The expropriation by the City of buildings belonging to delinquent landlords who refuse to obey the housing code and the conversion of these buildings into social housing.

Conclusion

We are pleased that the City is undertaking this public study on homelessness and hope that it will act quickly and effectively in the best interests of those who are currently homeless or precariously housed.

Thank you,

Cathy Inouye
Community Organiser
Project Genesis
4735 Côte-Ste-Catherine
Montreal, QC
H3W 1M1