

Service du greffe  
Commission sur les finances et l'administration  
155, rue Notre-Dame Est  
Montréal (Québec) H2Y 1B5

April 30, 2021

Dear Commission members,

In the context of this year's pre-budgetary consultation, I wish to provide my thoughts as a professor of urban studies. Like the majority of Canadians, Quebeckers, and Montrealers, I am strongly in favour of defunding the SPVM. The budget of the latter has been allowed to expand continually over the last two decades, while other necessary public services have either seen their budgets reduced or have not been funded in the first place. The city currently over-relies on the police for a vast series of issues that they are not the best or most economically efficient institution to address. The SPVM budget could easily be cut by 10% in the coming year by instituting a hiring freeze – something that has been applied to all other municipal services in recent years, except the SPVM and the fire department. I also believe 10% should be cut from the SPVM in the four years thereafter, with the money saved reinvested in community services that much better, and more efficiently, meet the needs of Montreal residents.

*On the subject of public consultations*

To begin, I'd like to register my criticism of last year's pre-budgetary consultation. As you know, the consultation showed that a strong majority of Montrealers support defunding the police. The way that this result was addressed by the Commission sur les finances et l'administration and the Comité Exécutif was problematic in many ways. First, the Commission improperly calculated the percentage of Montrealers who support defunding the police. On page 3 of the document, "Analyse des résultats – sondage de la consultation prébudgétaire 2021," it claims that 60% of Montrealers who participated in the pre-budgetary survey were in favour of cutting the SPVM budget. This is incorrect. The same page shows that 18,738 were in favour of defunding, while page 1 says that 25,804 people responded to the survey. That's 73%, not 60%. I've communicated with several representatives and staff members of the Commission in recent months, asking for this error to be corrected, and it has not been. Misrepresenting the views of Montrealers to this extent calls into question the value of the consultation itself.

Following the consultation, the Commission produced a set of recommendations to the Comité Exécutif. This included two recommendations concerning the SPVM budget, R-11 and R-12. After receiving this document, the Comité Exécutif is required to respond to each recommendation in writing. The Comité Exécutif failed to do this. In the document, "Réponse du comité exécutif au rapport de la Commission sur les finances et l'administration – Perspectives budgétaires 2021," the Comité Exécutif responds to every recommendation of the Commission except R-11 and R-12. Page 2 of the document includes a heading "Réponses à R-4, R-5, R-11,

et R-12,” but the text that follows does not mention R-11 or R-12 at all. Here again, a city institution fails to listen or even recognize the input of Montrealers regarding the budget.

The budget that resulted from this consultation was also deeply flawed. As is well known, the City opted to ignore the views of Montrealers on the SPVM budget. Rather than cutting the police budget, the City increased its operating budget by \$14.6 million and increased its capital budget by another \$6 million. What is the point of involving Montrealers in the development of the budget, when their clearest and most widely supported demand is simply tossed aside? When, in fact, the opposite of what Montrealers want is done instead?

The current consultation is off to a bad start. Once again, Montrealers are asked to participate in a pre-budgetary consultation. Their interest in defunding the SPVM is do doubt just as strong as last year. And yet, the city’s mayor, Valérie Plante, has said that defunding the police “is not on the table,” and the primary opposition party, Ensemble Montréal, has taken the same stance. Again, what is the point of involving Montrealers in this process, when their clearest and most widely supported demand is excluded from the start?

#### *Defunding the police, reinvesting in communities*

The need to reduce the SPVM budget is glaring. Since 2001, the SPVM budget has nearly doubled, growing from \$400 million in 2001 to \$680 million today. How can this be justified? Was the city underpoliced and unsafe in 2001? Is it a safer city now? A similar increase in the STM budget could never be justified unless it could be shown that Montrealers are now better served by public transportation.

It is well known, as well, that Montreal has the highest number of police officers per capita in Canada – and this, by a wide margin. Montreal has 36% more police officers per capita than the country’s ten other large cities, 35% more police per capita than Toronto, and 52% more police than the country’s fifty largest cities. Why? How can this be justified? If the number of police officers per capita in Montreal were consistent with the average for the country’s ten largest cities, it would have 1,300 fewer police and civil employees, and the SPVM budget would be about \$130 million lower. That’s a 20% budget cut.

Montreal is not alone in overspending on police. The urban studies literature shows that cities across North America have vastly increased their police budgets since the 1980s, while generally cutting spending on all other services. The result, not surprisingly, is that cities over-rely on the police to meet their needs – even when the police are not the best or most economically efficient institution to meet them. Think, for example, of mental health crises. We haven’t always expected the police to respond to them. We previously called on people trained in mental health to respond. Think of drug overdoses. Why are the police the ones called to respond, when there are other people in society specifically trained to respond to such issues? Think about homelessness. How often do we see the police intervening with homeless individuals? What does their training at Nicolet and their weapon offer in this situation? The argument is simple: because we’ve continued to increase police budgets, while cutting other services, we call on the police (with very high salaries) to respond to a range of issues they simply aren’t the best people to address. I’m

leaving aside, for now, the more serious problem: namely, that the police often harm or kill people that other (non-police) service providers would not.

Cutting the SPVM is economically efficient. There are many tasks that other lower-paid service providers should address. However, it is not simply about economic efficiencies. The point is not, for example, to cut the SPVM budget by closing certain buildings or spending less on materials. The point is to reduce the number of police officers employed by the city and to redirect money toward other service providers. Reducing the number of police officers can be done in many ways. The most straightforward is to introduce a hiring freeze. In the last five years, an average of 200 police officers have retired each year. Simply introducing a hiring freeze could reduce police personnel by around 1,000 people in the next five years. Beyond this, police officers should be paid to leave. This clearly involves a cost. However, the difference in salary between a police officer (which averages \$100,000 per year) and a community worker who could provide the same service better is considerable.

### *My recommendations*

My recommendations for the 2021-22 budget are the following:

- Reduce the SPVM budget by 10% in 2021-22, and 10% in each of the following four years.
- Achieve this budget cut by instituting a five-year hiring freeze and offering financial incentives for police officers to leave the institution.
- Reduce the *need* for police interventions in several ways: (1) create an independent emergency intervention team to deal with mental illness, drug overdoses, domestic violence, and homelessness (as Eugene, Oregon, has done and as Toronto will do this year); (2) create an independent team of street workers in neighbourhoods affected by gun violence to interrupt cycles of violence without police repression (as Chicago has done); and (3) request a federal exemption from the enforcement of drug possession laws (as Vancouver has done).

I understand that defunding the police sounds like an extreme measure to many city councillors (but not, evidently, to Montrealers in general). That perspective, however, can only be maintained to the extent that one has not thought about the issue, read anything on the subject, or talked to anyone who supports defunding. A quick reflection should be enough to show that the extreme measure is, in fact, continuing to devote more and more public money to institution that specializes in repression and violence. Montreal has many, many unmet needs. It does not have an unmet need for more repression and violence.

Sincerely,



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