

A few comments regarding the public consultation on commercial streets

At the suggestion of Mr. Richard Ryan, Président de la Commission du Conseil Municipal sur le développement économique, urbain et de l'habitation, I am submitting comments regarding the public consultation on commercial streets in Montreal.

The Commission's mandate is to consult the public in order to find solutions to the vacancy problem on commercial streets.

I am a journalist, a teacher and filmmaker. With the vacancy problem on commercial streets, as with most subjects I consider, I don't start with many answers, but I have lots of questions; good questions can lead to good answers. So from this perspective I respectfully suggest that the Commission consider the following:

1) Let's start at the beginning. Why do we have public streets? Why not just have private streets? (That's what malls and shopping centers are.) Why not restrict housing to certain streets, and shopping and industry to other streets as happens in many parts of our city? We often forget that the words civic, civil, city, citizen are related. Cities are for people. We design public streets initially for people, not for raising taxes, or creating thoroughfares so that traffic can move quicker through a city, or for creating zones that permit buildings but exclude people and places for people like parks or plazas. All of these need to be considered but they should not replace a public street's main purpose. Public streets - and especially commercial streets - are first and primarily for the public. Everything else comes second: parking meters, zoning restrictions, business taxes, what kinds of retail establishments, bars, restaurants and entertainment facilities are permitted. Every decision should be made with the objective of positively answering the question - is this good for those who live there and to induce people to come there.

2) What makes some streets more successful commercial streets than others? Simply put, people use them. People shop there, eat there, schmooze there, live nearby. These streets have few vacant stores. In my neighbourhood they include Monkland, Somerled, Sherbrooke west of Marcil, Victoria, Queen Mary, and most of Côte-des-Neiges. Each has a diverse variety of stores, residential housing, and community support. This may happen by accident but it can be supported by regulation (not too many bars in the same neighbourhood, for example), access to parking, sidewalks that invite alfresco dining, parks and squares not too far away, and benches for resting. Nearby, however, is Sherbrooke Street east of Decarie which over the past few years has been increasingly controlled by one real estate company holding out for high rents. Family run shops are disappearing, rents have risen, fast food chains and high end clothing boutiques open up, sometimes closing in a year or two. There appears to be no regulation regarding commercial establishments on commercial streets.

3) What do we gain and what do we lose when we don't develop with a common purpose? People leave, stores are shuttered, the city loses and a community is lost. What do we need to do to bring people back into a community? What does a community require to be resilient: places to live, to work, to shop, to eat, markets to feed a family, schools to raise a family. Whatever is required needs to be considered as we revitalize neighbourhoods and commercial streets. Without comity - a common purpose - a community is lost. How does one commercial street relate to the community around it? Every community is different and each commercial street should be evaluated as part of its community. What would happen if some vacant storefronts became clinics or daycare centers? How much richer would a neighbourhood be if an abandoned theatre became a senior's residence? How long should we, as a municipality, be prepared to let buildings, vacant land and storefronts be boarded up or papered over before getting involved?

4) What does the City itself control which could improve the vacancy problem on commercial streets? Consider the impact that City owned real estate has on commercial streets. For example, after years of neglect, the city finally permitted condo development of the Snowdon Theatre. This will be an asset to those stores nearby on Decarie Boulevard. Why hasn't the city done the same with the Empress/Cinema 5 theatre on Sherbrooke Street which has been vacant for more than 25 years? Imagine how a housing or a retail project could revitalize that section of Sherbrooke Street. Where else is the City holding back the potential for development?

5) While working within its mandate, what else could the commission recommend to make our commercial streets vibrant and healthy? What could we take from London's Healthy Streets Approach (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/health/transport-and-health/healthy-streets>) and from other cities facing problems similar to ours?

With these points in mind, I offer a few recommendations. The Commission should:

1) State that the function of commercial streets is first and foremost to serve their communities.

2) Evaluate those streets in Montreal which are successful and establish a "best practices" as to what can be incorporated into revitalizing other commercial streets.

3) Assess municipal real estate holdings (vacant buildings, underused buildings, parking lots, and other territory) and suggest how these could be used to improve the quality of life in the neighbourhood and create vibrant and successful commercial streets.

4) Impose a vacancy tax on buildings that are unoccupied after a specific time. as well as a supplementary tax on commercial buildings and residences on non-resident owners, particularly non-Canadian owners.

5) Broaden the Commission's recommendations to include proposals which would make commercial streets healthy for those who use them: retailers, those who come to shop, and those who live in the community.

A vacancy problem is a sign of a street in distress. A street in distress is a sign that a community is in trouble. The Commission has as important a role to play in revitalizing (giving back life) to these streets as a doctor does for a near terminal patient. To push the metaphor, there is no one remedy to creating a healthy person. A good doctor will look at several treatments to get a patient well. There is no quick fix to creating healthy commercial streets but - whatever recommendations - the objective is to give them back to the public.

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