

## **A reflection on green spaces, new roads, and an early death**

Steven Middleton – September 11, 2024

Several years ago, I moved to Hochelaga-Maisonneuve from Pointe Claire. In the last years of my stay in Pointe Claire it was obvious that the forces of urban development were hard at work filling in all the remaining green spaces left by previous city planners and their developer friends. What is now called densification was in full swing. Formerly unused green spaces disappeared under the weight and force of mechanical shovels removing trees, grasses and topsoil alike. Biodiversity, as it is now called, had no chance. I often wondered what the family of foxes that lived close to my home thought of its new neighbours. They either didn't wait around to find out or just died. After moving to Hochelaga – Maisonneuve one thing occurred to me about Pointe Claire: they did not build any new roads, and all the development was for quite nice housing of various forms.

I am now a resident of Viauville. By a strange twist of fate, just as I lived next to an area undergoing development in Pointe Claire, I am now living next to an area about to be developed adjacent to Viauville. The contrast is startling.

A few remarks are necessary about me and Viauville. If I walk south 100 metres from my home I reach rue Notre Dame, a street that is an incessant torrent of trucks and cars each trying to get past Viauville as quickly as possible. The noise and pollution are evident even to me who suffers from poor hearing and poor sense of smell. Alternatively, if I walk east from my home I am soon in a container storage yard where stacks of containers are shuffled around by giant mechanical insects frequently loading containers onto trucks which then take them for a ride on Notre Dame. At the heart of much of the activity bordering Viauville is the Port of Montreal, a modern port dealing with a wide assortment of cargoes and ships many of them being container ships. One frequent complaint of the Port to anyone who would listen is that it is nearly at capacity. A second complaint of the Port is that the trucks get stuck in traffic trying to get to the Port or leave the Port. I could point out that both their complaints are due to their own policies and desire to grow without regards to long term effects of such growth.

There are two other points to make about Viauville (and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve). The first is that it is already a high-density neighborhood, generally no swimming pools in back yards and no large driveways for two cars. Also, there are not many parks and green spaces and little chance for non-human biodiversity (although plenty of squirrels). The second point about Viauville which as you might imagine is important to me is that people in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve die earlier than if you live in Pointe Claire. Yes, in case you missed it, I said die.

The welcome to Viauville brochures, the new condo developer's publicity, and tourist guides do not seem to mention this fact. Why not? Well, the tourists are probably not here long enough for any long-term health effects to show, and the authors of tourist guides perhaps think it could deter visitors but maybe the tourists in their air conditioned busses might be interested to look at the people going about their business at the Marché Maisonneuve and speculate on what the locals think about this idea of dying earlier.

Government health reports point out that one contributor to the early death event (or EDE for those who like acronyms) is pollution. The air contains many pollutants from many sources,

but an important contributor is transport, that is cars, trucks, trains, and boats. By a subtle twist of fate these transport modes are the very reason for the new development next to my home. The opportunity for this development arose from the availability of land currently unused north of Notre Dame and close to the Port. This land has remained vacant for the last few years and has been reclaimed by nature and has acquired over recent years the status of unofficial green space. The area in general has an industrial past. All this has disappeared leaving a large area with an opportunity for an enlightened development geared towards in part, a recreational green space. Our politicians frequently speak of preserving green space, maintaining biodiversity, protecting the environment, clean water, clean air, less pollution, lower noise levels so we might conclude that a section of the area will be preserved as green space, and some innovative use proposed for the rest. You might then be surprised at the proposal for the land.

It is a new road for the Port and the extension of Assomption Blvd from Hochelaga to Notre-Dame system and a large container transloading centre. The new road will facilitate access for trucks entering and leaving the Port.

Pollution and noise from transport and associated logistic and port activities is obviously a factor reducing the quality of life to surrounding residents to say nothing of perhaps contributing to my and others untimely death. I have no wish to discuss details of the roads planned. Our elected officials have carefully hidden most of the plans for the longest time possible for perhaps fear of the rejection by the population. Other concerned organisations of people will no doubt provide better alternative ideas for uses. I merely find adding a road to promote truck traffic to be contradictory to all the pro environmental words coming out of the mouths of our elected leaders. Are they hiding their true intent? Are they really so unconcerned about my early death?

I offer one viewpoint on how poor long-term vision has got us into this mess. The Port has steadily expanded its activities over many years particularly in the era of containerisation. Having, by the Port's own admission, filled the banks of the river to capacity and filled Notre-Dame to capacity it now wants somebody else to solve the problem for them. We filled the road up now give us another road, the Port seems to say. Why should we? The Port generated its own fate. Look at a map. A large container vessel from Europe sails up the St- Lawrence almost to the centre of Montreal. They unload their cargoes and put them on trucks and then want a road to get them back out of the centre to the outlying highway system. It's a bit much. Having the Port next to a residential area also means that logistic groups like Ray-Mont want to set up in the neighbourhood to be close to the port. It seems I am going to be living next to the largest container transloading depot in North America. All with the blessing of my local politicians who claim to care for my welfare.

We are well into the 21<sup>ST</sup> century and the time to act on the major challenges of climate change, depletion of resources, and protecting human health and welfare is pressing. Every action, no matter how small, is significant. Each green space development is always justified by some urgent cause, but do we really need a new road to speed up the supply chain. I do not think so. We don't need any more new roads on the island of Montreal. It is well established that new roads merely encourage increased traffic until once again we reach a

new higher level of saturation with more pollution, more noise, more illness. We certainly need new schools, hospitals, housing, better public transport, but we don't need new roads for truck traffic. And I certainly don't need another factor contributing to my early death.