

Community groups want input on social housing in Hippodrome development

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In an aerial view of Côte des Neiges, it's impossible to miss the giant oval formed by the Montreal Hippodrome, surrounding an empty space sitting in the middle of a network of houses, buildings, and roads.

Just nearby, a new neighbourhood is teeming with condos that have sprung up over the past few years. The CDN-NDG borough would like to make "the Triangle," as it has dubbed the Namur-Jean Talon area, a model for a future residential development on the Hippodrome — but community groups aren't as enthusiastic about that plan.

The borough has promised to hold public consultations and gather public support, but groups are afraid the grassroots won't be allowed to contribute in a meaningful way.

"You can say it's partly a fear that we would be shut out of the process, but we really feel like that is what's happening," says Sheetal Pathak, community organizer at Project Genesis.

Pathak says there's history of community work and involvement around the area, and as a result, there is a clear understanding of what the community would like to see happen there.

"We fear that the borough is not looking at the community groups and grassroots organizations that work in the area as partners," she adds.

Jennifer Auchinleck, a community organizer with the Corporation de développement communautaire de Côte-des-Neiges, says lots of people and organizations participated in the public consultations for the Namur-Jean Talon project, but the discussions were held too late.

"Things were already in fact underway when that was happening. So that's a major difference we'd like to see, is that groups and the public want to be involved from the beginning and not kind of in a sort of small consultation in the end," she explains.

Pathak agrees with this assessment. Both organizers praise a report by the Office de consultation publique de Montréal on the Triangle development, but criticize the borough for its response to it.

"Their report really reflects what came out of that consultation, and...made a series of recommendations for Namur-Jean Talon," Pathak recalled. "The borough just kind of said 'oh well, that's not going to happen. We can't do that' on most of these recommendations."

Pathak and Auchinleck worry this outcome will be repeated.

The lack of social housing has long been an important and ongoing problem in Côte des Neiges, and it's one crucial issue bound to come up in any consultations.

Community groups want to see 2,500 social housing units within the development, and while Snowdon councilor Marvin Rotrand has stated social housing will be included, Auchinleck says that there hasn't been a clear commitment on building the needed units.

She also wants a more cohesive vision for the Hippodrome; while in the Triangle, different developers took over pieces of the land, Auchinleck calls for a more unified approach this time.

"We have this incredible potential of having this whole site be public and we have a chance to develop the whole site from A to Z, every aspect of it — the commercial parts, the residential parts," she says.

"What we do not want to see, but it is a possibility, would be instead of selling that whole piece of land to the city — have it be parceled up somehow and sold off in pieces to developers."

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