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Next phase of Griffintown public consultations to start

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CBC News

The next phase of public consultations on a radical \$1.3 billion dollar makeover project in Montreal's Griffintown gets underway Monday night.

Dozens of people and community groups are expected to submit briefs on the project that promises to transform the historic Irish district nestled between downtown Montreal and the Lachine Canal.

Developer Devimco is proposing to tear down most of the two-century old semi-industrial district and build a condominium complex, parking areas and a shopping mall. It aims to create a "pleasure" destination in an area once home to thousands of working-class Irish immigrants and now occupied by a handful of artists and professionals.

The project still needs final approval from the city of Montreal. Many fear the plan is ill-suited for Griffintown and could turn into a white elephant that Montreal will eventually regret.

"We're not against development," insists Chris Gobeil, a chartered accountant who, along with his wife, bought and renovated what is now a heritage home in Griffintown.

Gobeil has spearheaded local efforts to draw public attention to the Devimco project, which he and his allies, member of the Committee for Sustainable Redevelopment of Griffintown, believe needs much fine-tuning before any ground is broken.

"We just want them to respect what is there already and look for solutions that are innovative," he said in an interview with CBCNews.ca. "Not just impose this sort of suburban-lifestyle-centre, shopping-centre concept on us."

Buildings, streets rich in history

It may look like a desolate, abandoned industrial sector today, but Griffintown is "imbued with culture" said Steven Peck, an Irish-Canadian city planner who now calls Montreal home.

The district — roughly defined by Notre-Dame Street, McGill and Guy Streets, and the Lachine Canal — was the landing point in Montreal for Irish immigrants who left a geographical mark reflected in the row houses and tenement buildings that still stand as the first of their kind in Canada, he said.

Even the street pattern — an organized grid — has heritage value, because it was the first of its type in Montreal.

Those buildings "really should be viewed more as an asset than things that should be pushed aside," Peck said.

As far as he can see, the Devimco plan proposes to wipe out that design heritage, which would be a shame, he said.

"I think it's far too valuable a district or neighbourhood to squander by allowing it to be developed in a rash manner that people will regret in the future."

Residents want project to slow down

Griffintown is also home to the Horse Palace — the last working courtyard in the city — a veritable "gem" in the eyes of many, including Robert Mellin, associate professor of architecture at McGill University, and a local resident.

There's no indication in Devimco's plans the Palace will be preserved, which would be a great loss for Montreal, said Mellin, who is also a member of the Griffintown Committee.

But more importantly, Mellin doubts Devimco's claims of sustainability. Griffintown is an "eminently sustainable area, it has great potential that way just by virtue of its location" because of its proximity to the downtown core, metro lines, and the waterfront.

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But the Devimco project plans don't provide any evidence that there has been substantial research done on sustainability, Mellin said.

"They do mention it, and most proposals I've reviewed in the last few years do, but it's a fashionable word that can be thrown around," he said.

Devimco could not respond to interview requests this week. The company's spokesman, Georges Bossé, is on holiday until the end of month.

Mellin said real innovation might include artist spaces, urban agriculture and a focus on public transit, features seem to be lacking in the Devimco proposal.

Montreal is "a city that was taken over by cars. The new proposal plans to bring in thousands of cars every year; there would be a lot of traffic in the area," he said.

"I would like to see a proposal that emphasizes more public transportation and reduces dependency on the car."

If anything, Mellin wants a "long-term, incremental process" to develop the sector, rather than handing over the 25-acre parcel of land to one developer.

Residents want more consultation

The consultation process, a handful of public information meetings and hearings where people will submit their briefs is "too short", Mellin said. "Our fear is that a lot of the basic research has not been done, and that much of the planning work has been abdicated, given over to developers."

"There has to be more guidance provided."

The Griffintown Committee is ready to offer advice at public hearings this week, and hopes Devimco and the city of Montreal will listen.

The public meetings earlier this winter were "confrontational" Gobeil admits.

A more civil tone could foster real discussion, he said. "As citizens, our views should be weighed and not wedged in at the very end, as they're planning on doing it."