

# City of Sherbrooke purchases land in Ascot-Lennox Forest to build new primary school

By Lawrence Belanger  
Local Journalism Initiative

Sherbrooke is acquiring land in an area known to many as the Ascot-Lennox Forest in order to build a new primary school, as well as to conserve the surrounding woods. According to a press release from the city, an agreement has been reached to acquire 37 plots of land located near Claire-Guillemette-Lamirande Park, which is on Rue Frédéric-Garand in the Ascot district.

The forest is a popular hiking locale for residents of Lennoxville and Ascot, although none of the paths through the woods are official, and much of the land is private property. It is also one of the sole remaining natural areas within Sherbrooke's urban perimeter. For these reasons, citizens

have been organizing to protect its ecological and recreational value.

The Association for the Protection and Enhancement of the Boisé Ascot-Lennox, which has been working to purchase land in the forest, was supportive of the announcement as a whole, but has some concerns regarding the environmental impact of building a school and is waiting to hear more from the city at upcoming municipal council meetings to understand more about the conservation aspects of the plan.

Alexandre Seguin Desy, a founding member of the Association, was critical of the specific plots purchased by the city.

"I question why they bought this land," said Desy, "and not a larger plot nearby with less ecological value."

Desy, a high school teacher at École internationale du Phare, hypothesized that the purchase may have to do with the owners of these larger plots, who may have had too high an asking price. has a personal stake in the conservation of the forest so that his PE students may continue to use the nearby paths as part of their education. He says the group, which has recently become a recognized non-profit, has so far purchased one plot of land, which it crowdfunded this year.

In a press release issued by the city, Geneviève La Roche, Councillor for the Ascot Borough and Chair of the Land Use Planning Commission stated that, "a large part of the land will be preserved in a natural environment. I am very proud of these important gains for the population of

the sector."

While Desy and the rest of the non-profit group are happy with these statements, it remains to be seen what the city will elect to do with the property, which according to the release is conducting various "analyses" on-site.

Per the press release, the city is paying \$116,000 (\$4,000 per lot) for 29 of the lots, which are owned by the same owner. The cost of acquiring the other eight lots is \$38,500. After various site analyses are complete, the city plans on a public consultation period in 2023. While the rest of the forest's fate is even more uncertain, the citizens association hopes to raise up to \$500,000 to purchase other plots in the forest, and the "Protégeons le Boisé Ascot-Lennox" page on GoFund.me is still live.

## Winter months

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This rarely happens, with Sherbrooke inconsistently clearing and treating its sidewalks throughout the winter.

Croteau is a member of the Regroupement des usagers du transport adapté de Sherbrooke Métropolitain (RUTA), an advocacy group dedicated to protecting the rights of disabled transit users, and is the group's treasurer. According to statistics from Transport Quebec, STS paratransit users include more than just those using wheelchairs or walkers. Some have visual, mental, or psychological disabilities. They are of any age, including one person in the 1-5 age range in 2021 who was admitted to STS paratransit.

One of the group's brochures details the history of the RUTA, stemming from when the city of Sherbrooke became responsible for paratransit, replacing a corporation founded in 1977 whose board of directors members were mostly disabled. The group that became RUTA sought to be included in the important decisions being made by the service that impact the most vital parts of their lives and became incorporated in 1985.

According to Croteau, paratransit users in Sherbrooke are happy about the paratransit service offered by STS,

citing the low refusal rate for reserving a ride, especially when compared to larger cities like Montreal. Most of the problems regarding the service itself relate to improving driver training, and scheduling; or they are adjacent problems that STS has no direct control over - such as a landlord not removing snow in time for a pickup (drivers must help the rider to and from the vehicle, and will cancel a trip if they can't safely access a home's door).

Furthermore, some who don't need paratransit during the warmer weather might require it during the winter. One such example mentioned by Croteau was of RUTA member Eric Samson, who is able to walk but has an impairment that impacts his stability that requires an even surface, meaning ice and snow can make him fall dangerously.

To supplement its paratransit buses, STS contracts other companies to offer its services. These other services are inconsistent, with many drivers not knowing all the rules and regulations surrounding paratransit. RUTA President Raymond Duquette prefers the STS vehicles for this reason.

In fact, these issues were on display during the Record's interview with Croteau and Duquette, the latter of which arrived using the very paratransit service we were to speak about. The

vehicle, owned by Les Promenades de l'estrie, drove around the block twice before actually disembarking the group's president. The driver, who said it was his first time, seemed confused about how to drop off Duquette, who uses an electric wheelchair, on the proper side of the one-way street that the group's office is on.

STS has also been slow to make their regular buses capable of offering paratransit services. RUTA first started pushing for this in 2010, but budget cuts in 2014 forced STS in 2016 to delay implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic also delayed this, although the 2022 universal accessibility development plan includes RUTA's original demand.

RUTA is currently engaged in advocacy for STS to add adapted taxis to its paratransit service. "We're working hard to ask the STS to use the adaptive taxi," says Croteau, who explains that there are people who would find the taxi more comfortable than the bus, but because the only adapted taxi in Sherbrooke isn't used by STS, these potential users don't use paratransit at all.

Membership in RUTA is open to any disabled person using STS paratransit, as well as to people with a direct or indirect connection with paratransit.



LAWRENCE BELANGER

RUTA president Raymond Duquette arrives at the organization's office via a contracted paratransit vehicle owned by Les Promenades de l'estrie.

## Missisquoi North volunteer centre

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"I have been a police officer for fourteen years now," shared Labonté. "I am from the Drummondville area however I am happy to serve the Municipality of Potton along with my colleagues and to be a connection for community organizations like the CABMN in seeking services and information regarding our police force and questions surrounding the applicable laws."

During her visit, it was important for Labonté to find out more about the services offered by the Volunteer Centre. She exchanged with staff members like Angelle Laplume - Senior Services Team Member at the CABMN and was also able

to meet other staff and volunteers as well.

"As many services diminish due to a lack of staff in some service centres, it is important to keep connected with those with whom we collaborate," said Laplume. "We at the CABMN Volunteer Centre have long held a wonderful communication and involvement with the police and visits like today from Sergeant Labonté merely solidify and strengthen the link," she added.

The first question asked by those coming and going at the CABMN office in seeing the police officer present was, "Is something wrong?" The overwhelming response of all present was, "No,

something on the contrary is very right. Meet our Potton SQ Godmother, Jacinthe Labonte..."



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