



Chantier de Revitalisation Urbaine et Sociale du Quartier Saint-Michel

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St. Michel's Community Plan
(An English summary of the St. Michel Proposal)

December 8, 2004

St. Michel, a thriving neighbourhood in the heart of Montreal

A. Introduction

The “Chantier”, the organizational focal point for the urban and social revitalization of the St. Michel neighbourhood aims to transform its community. Its overall objective is to create a new positive neighbourhood identity which will enable it to better integrate its residents into its social, cultural and economic life, as well as better integrating the neighbourhood into the big city of Montreal. To undertake this work, Vivre St. Michel en santé, the local action committee, mobilized local and regional decision-makers, along with neighbourhood residents to create a common strategic vision of development. In addition, they identified the key priority areas for intervention focused on the reduction of poverty and social exclusion.

The vision of development which emanated from a community assembly held in June 2004 laid out the broad parameters of an action plan stated as follows:

“St. Michel, a pleasant neighbourhood within which to live, supportive of family life and multicultural exchanges, an active and unified community, which takes charge of its affairs and also contributes to the vigour of Montreal.”

This vision is built upon four pillars coming from local people:

- That it is the product of citizen action, participatory & inclusive;
- That it represents a continuity of the action underway for more than a decade;
- That it is focused on the battle against poverty and social exclusion in the neighbourhood;
- That it is open to outside participation and is oriented towards an integration into the larger municipality.

It is with a great deal of pride that Vivre St. Michel en santé (the sponsoring organization) presents the plan of action of the “Chantier” to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Background

There is a history of organizing in St. Michel, most recently dating back to 1991 when as a part of a healthy communities’ movement, the neighbourhood created Vivre St. Michel en santé (VSMS). It became a local organizational focal point for connecting local people and for bringing together groups to promote local projects. It favoured complementing the work of other community, public and private groups and facilitated increased community control over its own development. Its work resulted in the creation of a number of local organizations dealing with housing and other issues such as improving the environment through the closure of huge local quarries used as massive garbage dumps. The work of VSMS put St. Michel on the map and built some strong community linkages and an increased willingness on the part of locals to work together. In spite of certain positive developments, such as the arrival of the Cirque du Soleil headquarters, poverty and exclusion persisted. There is still a lacking, the identity of the neighbourhood continues to be defined by its past role as a dumping ground for garbage.

Thus the neighbourhood and the VSMS were ready for a second, more ambitious organizing effort focused on w battle against poverty and social exclusion. It was in this context that Vibrant Communities (VC) appeared and United Way of Montreal offered to become a sponsoring partner in a St. Michel pilot project. In the spring of 2003, the work with began.

B. Description

Based upon the four pillars noted earlier, the work underway builds on initiatives already underway and it is grounded in the neighbourhood because:

- It is the result of a citizen-driven, participatory and inclusive process. Local people have been involved from the outset and their words count. A survey of 300 people was undertaken, local focus groups were organized, public meetings which gathered as many as 400 people, at least 160 of whom were local residents, were organized and a forum was held specifically to connect with and involve youth;
- It builds on local initiatives in the areas of housing, food, environment, families, security, transport, employability, intercultural relations and mental health, etc. The VSMS strategy was to “add value” to these initiatives and expand them further;
- It seeks to tackle poverty and social exclusion which it sees as having multiple causes, some economic, some political, others social and environmental. To tackle these causes, multiple targets have been identified in order to reduce the number of poor and to create a positive environment for individuals and the community;

- It is committed to participation from the outside and a strengthening of links with the wider Montreal community. It is the view of VSMS that it will take the combined efforts of local residents and partners from outside the community to make progress in such a difficult area. However, the goal is also to create a dynamic community which can contribute to Montreal as a whole.

Between March and June, 2004, the community mobilized to take advantage of the opportunity. Two big community meetings contributed to the planning and analysis of the situation, a vision for the community was articulated, along with strategies for intervention. Follow-up continued into the fall with working groups of citizens and supporters meeting to define objectives and projects within a plan of action.

The Situation

Based upon a socio-economic profile, a community survey, local focus groups, workshops leading up to the public meeting, the neighbourhood “weaknesses” were identified which included:

- low individual and family incomes
- poor quality housing in certain areas
- infrequent interaction between visible minorities and Quebec society
- a feeling of insecurity on the part of local people in the evenings and at night
- insufficient sport and cultural facilities for adults and youth alike
- the limited involvement of the average citizen and business person in the development of the neighbourhood
- the geographic fragmentation of the community (e.g. autoroutes, etc)
- the poor image of the neighbourhood.

Priorities

The three most important targets defined by the planning process and validated by the second large public meeting, in order of importance were listed as:

1. the low individual and family incomes in the neighbourhood;
2. the poor quality of housing in the north and eastern parts of the neighbourhood;
3. the development of cultural, recreational and sports facilities in the neighbourhood.

A cross-cutting theme deals with the insecurity felt by citizens of the area in the evening and at night.

These priority action areas are not the only areas where work will be (or has been) undertaken in the neighbourhood because some actions are already underway under the auspices of VSMS. Some thirty intervenors are working on the harmonization of early

childhood development initiatives and funding has been obtained to launch a team effort in this regard. A youth action group (GAJ) was started in the early 1990s and it has organized a number of youth forums and school retention projects. Work with senior citizens includes efforts to create a community centre. Mental health work is underway in the area and for the last two years an action committee has been in working at these issues. VSMS has been the animator and sometimes initiator of these efforts.

The Action Plan

Based upon the three priorities identified by local people, the following steps are part of an action plan for the years 2005-2008:

1. Individual and family incomes – poverty is an evident characteristic of local family life due to low incomes and the availability of poor quality low cost housing in the area. When family situations improve, many leave the community for other areas with better housing and amenities. Given the widespread nature of local poverty, improving individual and family incomes is the first priority.

Targets

- # 1. Focus on training linked to employment opportunities in local businesses:
 - agreements have been reached with three businesses in the neighbourhood – 50 people a year will have been employed by these businesses
- # 2. Promote in training in schools in areas needing workers:
 - 4000 young people will have been reached by an awareness campaign promoting employment and entrepreneurship
 - 1000 youth will have made contact with individuals or centres related to employment opportunities in the region
 - Each year, 30 youth from the ages of 12 to 30 years old will have had a work experience in a local business.
- # 3. Focus on attracting and retaining businesses, as well as the development of two large projects in the neighbourhood:
 - A multidisciplinary team will have been established and each year it will have helped establish 10 business in the community
 - The expansion of two big projects/businesses in the neighbourhood will have enabled 500 people to have received training and gained employment
- # 4. Focus on reducing the expenses of families and individuals:
 - A self help fund is available to local people
 - The availability of the fund is promoted
 - The fund assists 25 individuals or families each year

- # 5. Increase family and individual incomes:
 - An information program is directed to make people aware of certain programs
 - 5% of the beneficiaries informed have had access to increased transfer funds
- # 6. Focus on the employment of vulnerable groups:
 - All funds available to the neighbourhood are spent
 - A small fund is created to support daycare places, access to transport, clothes and other needs to support staying in school or in a job

2. Affordable and accessible housing is the next priority – the poor quality of housing means housing is less expensive than the average cost in Montreal. This situation has led to a lower quality of life and frequent exodus when family situations improve. Thus improving the housing situation is imperative.

Targets

- # 1. Renovate housing with priority on certain designated areas:
 - 40% of the owners reached have undertaken renovations
 - A management mechanism is created to facilitate harmony between renters
 - The same organization buys and renovates 100 units of housing
 - A housing bureau is created to inform and assist people looking for lodging or having housing problems – 300 people are assisted annually
- # 2. Assist people to become first time buyers and to own property:
 - 300 renters are helped by this program
 - 60 housing units are built or renovated and sold as affordable units
 - A housing and neighbourhood investment fund is created with the participation of 5 private sector partners and the fund has supported 2 neighbourhood revitalization projects
 - A program is launched by a financial institution and its partners to assist locals to build their own capital
 - 10 households are involved in this program annually.
- # 3 Focus on the creation of mixed use and co-op housing:
 - A project is underway within one year
 - 150 housing units are available for targeted groups (e.g. handicapped, single parent families, youth in difficulty and with mental health problems)
- # 4. Develop new housing construction projects, including recycling small industrial buildings into housing or joint use:
 - A team is created and 100 housing units are constructed in the area.

3. Accessible cultural, social and sports facilities and services

Targets

- # 1 To develop a dynamic program of recreation, sports and cultural practices
 - A working group is created, a program developed and made available at 2 sites and the number of people signed up for the activities proposed by partners is increased by 10%
 - A planned program is offered locally and the number of participants and the level of involvement is increased by 25%
 - A major event is planned to promote culture, sports and recreation and 3000 people are reached by this activity

- # 2. To assure the availability and adequate access and security to these opportunities:
 - A centre is built and opened for local people
 - The desired improvements are attained

