

Saint-Michel Promotes Community Engagement through Culture

• Challenge •

The primary purpose of Vibrant Community convenor organization Le Chantier's is to reduce poverty and social exclusion in the Montreal neighbourhood of Saint-Michel. As an offshoot of a larger community revitalization effort known as Vivre Saint-Michel en santé (VSMS), part of Le Chantier's work will be to address the a lack of cultural and sport opportunities in the region. These gaps were identified by earlier VSMS research and community consultations. Especially underserved are the area's children and youths. Ironically, the neighbourhood's facilities include an arena and a library and a considerable number of activities are sponsored by various public agencies and community groups. Even with these amenities and programs, participation rates are low and the community has identified the need for a community sports and recreation facility.

The challenges highlighted during public consultations included the lack of culturally appropriate services for newcomers, green spaces, and sports and cultural opportunities for the large numbers of youths and children. The poor state of sports equipment and accessibility to facilities was also identified by residents in some parts of the neighbourhood.

• Strategy •

The VSMS action plan for 2005-2008 stressed the importance of culture as well as the need for cultural, sport and recreational facilities that are diversified, accessible and of high quality. It also recognized the value of these activities and their potential to reduce exclusion, promote citizen participation and stimulate economic development. Improving opportunities in these areas were seen as a means of strengthening self-esteem and expanding team work and intercultural dialogue within the community.

The Commission Scolaire de Montreal, the Cirque de Soleil and Le Chantier jointly identified the opportunity to develop a pilot program within the school system that will be directed at promoting arts and culture among children and youths. A project steering committee was formed, and a proposal was presented to the community and school administrations for approval.

Cirque de Soleil is acting as the lead agency in this undertaking. Together with other community partners, two schools have been identified for participation — Bienville and Saint-Mathieu. The focus of the project will be to initially introduce preschoolers between the ages of 4 and 5 to the arts and cultural activities. Five disciplines were chosen: dance, film, music, theatre and circus arts. Slated to begin in September 2006, the skills taught by the project will be integrated into the curriculum of the two schools. Currently, the project animators have been hired and are being trained for the project launch.

• *Impact* •

Members of Le Chantier hope to improve access to cultural, sports and recreational activities as a way of promoting community participation and engagement. In this project, Le Chantier intends to reach preschool children through a pilot project within two local schools in Saint Michel. The project's ultimate objective is to reach 300 local children.



In From the Field: Preliminary Initiatives from Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities