

Tools for Community Engagement

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Let them Eat Cake: Imagining a Truly Great Vendome Metro Station

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Abstract

McGill's School of Urban Planning has been working with community members and MUHC staff since 2008 via a community-university research alliance (CURA), supporting a goodwill negotiation process aimed at improving the integration of the McGill mega-hospital into the surrounding neighbourhoods. In this context, and via a fortuitous visit from a guest lecturer, students engaged residents near the MUHC hospital site via two interconnected exercises to reimagine the Vendome Metro station and its environs. This consultation report finds that decision-makers should improve bike path connectivity in the area and suggests a number of ways to improve the Vendome Metro station, including greening the station and its environs, improved mass transit services, and making the station a community hub and shopping destination with coffee shops, restaurants and other services and amenities.

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CURA } Community-University Research Alliance
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Introduction

In November 2011, students from McGill's School of Urban Planning conducted an unusual public consultation on the future of the area surrounding the Vendome Metro. A major transformation to the area is already underway, given the construction of the new McGill University Health Centre (MUHC), leading to a reconfiguration of traffic and transport to serve the new complex, in addition to the reconstruction of the Turcot Complexe. As a result, changes have been proposed for the Vendome Metro. However, nearby residents and transit users of this metro station have had few opportunities to express how they would like to see the space improved. This brief provides a modest contribution towards filling that consultation gap. Via two interconnected exercises, students engaged passers-by in a reflection on their urban space. In one exercise, users of the space co-constructed a scale model of the neighbourhood in chocolate cake; in another, these same participants completed the sentence "Vendome would be great if...". This briefing note explains the event and summarizes the material generated, for the consideration of the STM and other partners as they consider how to best improve the Vendome metro for its transit users.

Context

McGill's School of Urban Planning has been working with community members and MUHC staff since 2008 via a community-university research alliance (CURA), supporting a goodwill negotiation process aimed at improving the integration of the McGill mega-hospital into the surrounding neighbourhoods. As part of this process, the CURA has explored various methods to engage the community in influencing neighbourhood change. The opportunity to use chocolate cake in a resident planning exercise was purely fortuitous. A visiting lecturer, Alex Gilliam (founder of Public Workshop), who had used this method successfully in other planning contexts, was in town to deliver a talk, and students jumped at an opportunity to tap into his experience using a real-world exercise.

Process

The organising team assembled materials (baking tins and assorted candy in addition to colourful paper that would allow participants to complete the sentence "Vendome would be great if..."), applied for permits from the STM and City of Montreal, and solicited the participation of community partners, hospital spokespeople and local schools. Both activities took place simultaneously between 10am and 1pm, on Friday November 18,

2011. The vast majority of participants were pedestrian passers-by who were accessing or leaving the Vendome Metro Station.

The Chocolate Cake

Phase One was to prepare the site topography (lay out the chocolate cake slabs on a 3x8 foot table and mold them into a rough “terrain”). The area of NDG modeled in cake included parts of the site of the new MUHC hospital (south), Victoria Street and the old railway station (east), a couple of blocks west of the Decarie Expressway (west) and Sherbrooke Street (to the north). Gilliam led this initial exercise by pressing his fist into the chocolate cake where the Decarie Expressway was actually gouged into the soil of Notre-Dame-de-Grace, in the 1960s. Phase Two was to illustrate current land use with the aid of a scale photograph of the selected area, placed underneath the 3x8 table, which involved placing cake cubes where buildings stand. Phase Three was to “decorate” the cake with tiny cake building infill, bike paths of licorice, and streets filled with jelly bean cars.

An estimated 200 people participated in some way in the chocolate cake event.

The major conclusion to the Chocolate Cake exercise, based on the interactions by participants around the building and decorating of the neighbourhood, was that there should be a stronger effort to improve the bike path network around the Vendome Station. This result was echoed in the parallel exercise, “*Vendome would be great if...*”.

“Vendome would be great if...”

In parallel to this neighbourhood-building exercise, approximately 90 people completed a reply to the question “Vendome would be great if...”. Each signed a disclaimer and allowed their photograph to be taken, some of which have been included in a short video of the event (see end note for the url).

Analysis of the results revealed the following top three responses:

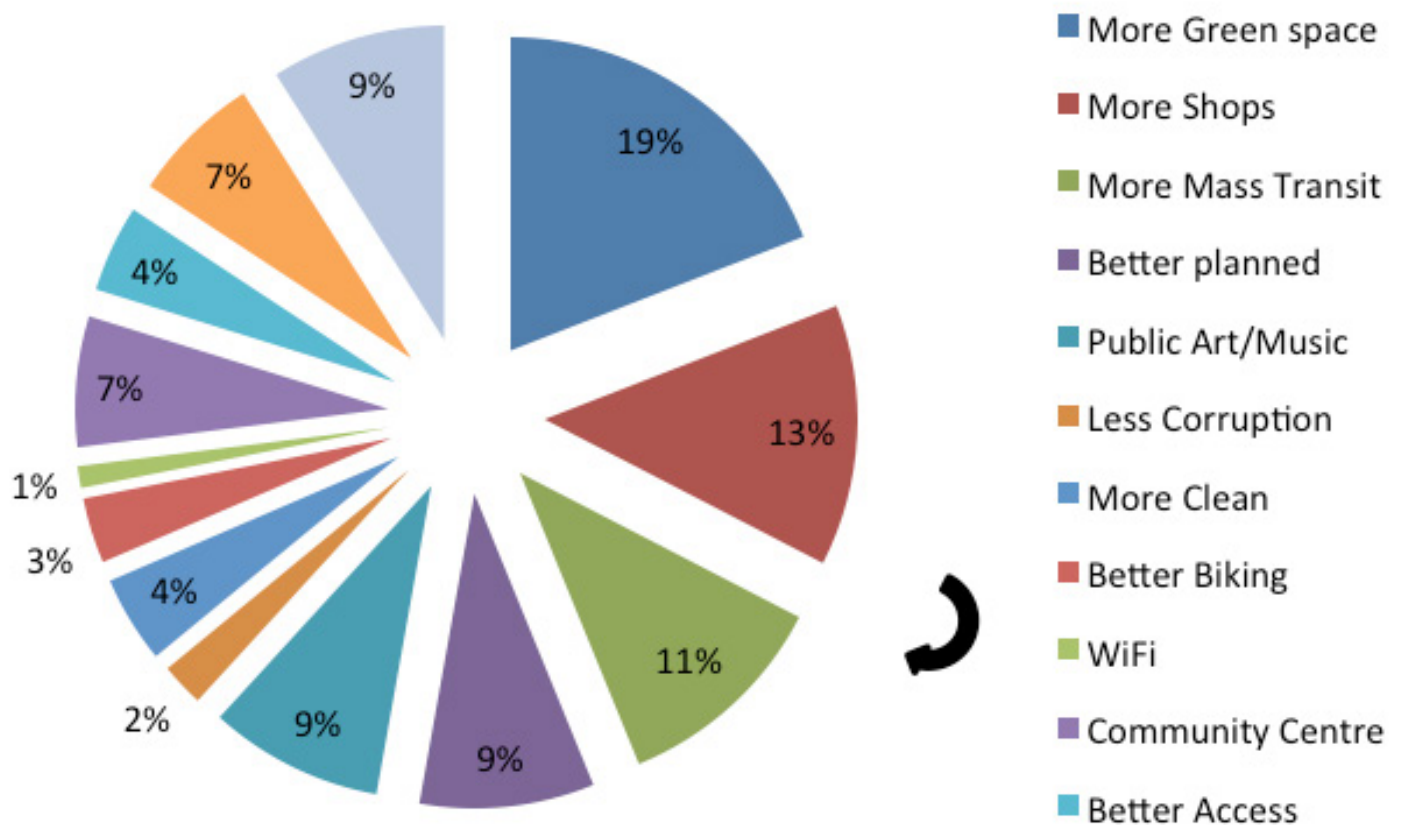
- more green spaces (17 responses),
- more shops (12 responses) and
- more mass transit service (10 responses).

Other inputs included adding WiFi in and around the station (1 response), public art and music (8 responses) and less corruption (2 responses).

It is fair to conclude that at least some users of this area do think it would benefit from some serious rethinking. A composition vision of a 'great Vendome metro" emerging from public input is:

Vendome Metro Station would be great if it was enlarged to permit the easier passage of travelers, with more mass transit services, via a community hub that acts as a shopping destination with coffee shops, restaurants, services and amenities nested in an attractive green space with fountains and birds and lots of places to sit. And wifi.

The following pie chart illustrates an analysis of results from this exercise, in greater detail:



Graphic representation of results: *Vendome would be great if...*

Conclusion

The Vendome Metro is a busy transportation hub, and, with the arrival of the MUHC hospital, it will get considerably busier. Properties on the South side of deMaisonneuve have been acquired by the MUHC, including the air rights over the Vendome Metro station. Current zoning permits up to 8 storeys. Negotiations are advancing rapidly between mass transit authorities and the MUHC on a direct pedestrian connection between Vendome and the new hospital, via a second exit from the metro platform. Major changes are coming to the area around the Vendome Metro. As this exercise showed, end-users have insight into ways to improve the facilities. Their suggestions – and those of others – point to important elements in the design of an expanded, improved user-friendly transit hub.

Complementary Research Outputs

Chocolate Cake Model of a Better Vendome: a video report

<http://vimeo.com/36785714>

Public Workshop's coverage of the event:

<http://publicworkshop.us/blog/2011/11/21/vendomechocolatecakepla/>

CBC News coverage:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/oversized-cake-gets-ndg-residents-talking-1.1071470>

<http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/Montreal/ID/2169000880/>