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Ste-Catherine St. needs a painless makeover, real-estate exec Léopold says



PAUL DELEAN, MONTREAL GAZETTE

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SECTIONS

Canadian real-estate developer and entrepreneur Stephen Leopold speaks to an audience during a luncheon by the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal at Bonaventure Hotel in Montreal on Tuesday, March 10, 2015.

Dario Ayala / Montreal Gazette)

The reconstruction of downtown Ste-Catherine St., scheduled to begin next year, will put its future as a commercial artery at risk unless it's done swiftly and with minimal disruption, local real-estate executive Stephen Léopold told the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal in a luncheon address Tuesday.

“Remember what happened when the city replaced infrastructure on Parc Ave., St-Laurent Blvd. and St-Denis (St.)? We bankrupted businesses and have still not been able to restore their former commercial success and tax base,” said Léopold, chairman of the board

of commercial and industrial real-estate brokerage Immodev.

He called Ste-Catherine St. “the greatest generator of commercial activity in our city,” the “largest and most diverse shopping centre in North America” and the “heart, soul and spine of our city.”

For that reason, he said, the municipality shouldn’t limit itself to replacing century-old infrastructure, but rather seize the opportunity to innovate with features like heated sidewalks and parking meters equipped with power chargers for electric cars.

“There is no street in the world that is as important to a major city as Ste-Catherine is to Montreal. And that is why we must take special care to enhance its appeal, and very special care not to disrupt it,” Léopold said.

“We run the risk of perturbing, and potentially causing irreparable damage, to the motor of our city in the not-too-distant future. We also have an immense opportunity to transfer this motor into an economic turbine 10 times more powerful, both during and after the infrastructure work to be realized soon.”

If the job is not done right or promptly, he said, a downtown already feeling the effects of off-island megacentres and headed for a 20-per-cent vacancy rate in office space could find itself on a damaging path.

The city announced last year that Ste-Catherine would get an extensive rebuild, starting with the section from Bleury to Mansfield Sts. next year. In addition to repairing water and sewage pipes, it intends to widen sidewalks and add greenery and seating. Executive committee chairman Pierre Desrochers said the city wants the work done “in the

best conditions possible” and with minimal impact for all concerned.

Long-term plans for the downtown strip are being drafted following public consultations and will be unveiled by May, with options including the elimination of one or both parking lanes and reversion to a two-way street.

Léopold would like to see it continue to welcome cars.

“Ste-Catherine needs cars. Have we not learned our lesson from the abysmal failure of Prince Arthur St.? Do we think that sticking a bunch of bars, restaurants and ice-cream stands on the street in that short period of summer warmth will replace the rents that Victoria’s Secret’s upcoming Canadian flagship store, or HMV, or Apple, are paying to be on a street where it is easy to come to, shop and carry bags back to one’s cars.

“We like our cars and will use them and find a convenient way to use them. And if our Ste-Catherine St. shopping centre doesn’t want to make it easy, then we will move elsewhere and shop elsewhere just as we have done with (Quartier) Dix30 (in Brossard) and other shopping malls. The war on cars has not worked to our downtown’s benefit and it will not work.”

He also had suggestions for how the city could help the street and its merchants through the construction period.

Working around the clock would be one way of minimizing disruptions, which should be a job priority, he said. Steel platforms over excavations would allow vehicle or pedestrian traffic to continue, he said, noting that New York is building a subway tunnel while maintaining 24-hour

traffic, seven days a week.

Adding “high-definition facial-recognition cameras,” and “massive amounts of extra lighting” to the street would make pedestrians feel safe at night, Léopold said.

“If we don’t institute these lighting measures during construction, we will be responsible for creating a dangerous criminal breeding ground on a street that has already become far less safe at night than it used to be,” he said. “In this world where terrorism is at the tip of every security person’s lips, make no mistake about it, these cameras are a vital addition to our most crowded and densely-populated artery.”

Merchants also have an active role to play, Léopold said. “As only an interim measure, require all store keepers and property owners to be responsible for the clearance of snow and the salting of the sidewalk in front of their buildings. This might seem like a burden on business, but it will in fact increase business, because it will attract more customers. It is done in New York City and people walk and shop 12 months of the year. In Montreal, we do everything we can to avoid walking on city and treacherous sidewalks for close to half a year and therefore shopping at the stores fronting on those sidewalks. From this moment on, we need to say: This is no longer acceptable.”

Glenn Castanheira, executive director of business group La Société de développement du boulevard St-Laurent, said he hopes the mistakes of the past have been learned, but has his doubts. Six years after the work on St-Laurent Blvd. finally ended, he still gets asked by out-of-towners if it’s safe to venture back to the street. And there have been numerous local examples since of street work that dragged on unduly.

“We really don’t have any excuses,” he said. “Cities around the world keep showing us that they can do major construction that’s essential in such a way that it doesn’t impact commerce as badly and the city as much. St-Laurent was a living hell ... the best example of what not to do again.”

Jimmy Zoubris, secretary-treasurer of the Parc Ave. Merchants’ Association, said he agreed with most of Léopold’s suggestions, with the exception of the snow removal and salting (“we do what we can, but the city has a responsibility there”).

Zoubris said business on Parc Ave. still isn’t back to what it was, more than two years after completion of the drawn-out infrastructure project on that thoroughfare. “You’ve got to get in and out as quickly as possible, because the longer it takes, the longer it’s an inconvenience, business will be hurt. There’s a stigma. People aren’t going to go where there’s construction.”

Round-the-clock work, if feasible, “would be wonderful,” Zoubris said. “And if you can add value to the street (with innovations), that’s also a plus.”

In a letter to the Montreal Gazette last year, Zoubris also suggested that water, electrical and gas utilities be required to work in collaboration, that above-ground improvements be undertaken as soon as each section of road is completed, and that the city alleviate parking problems by providing free or discounted spaces in proximity of the work.

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