TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY

VILLAGE DE LA GARE, Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Quebec

Figure 1—View of residential streetscape, showing townhouses with porches

Project data

Location	Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Quebec
Developer	Groupe Cooke Bombardier Lesage, Inc. (Groupe CBL)
Date completed	2002–2012
Site area	73 ha (180 acres)
Residential unit type	A combination of single-family detached homes, duplexes, townhouses and multi-unit buildings (4–6 units each). At completion, the project will include 1,000 units, with the number of each housing type to be determined as build-out continues and needs are assessed. To date, 350 residential units have been built.
Unit size	Apartments are 65 m^2 (700 sq. ft.) and more, while houses are 140 m^2 (1,500 sq. ft.) and more.
Other land uses on the site	The development will be mixed-use and include residential and commercial uses as well as green space and community facilities. A primary school is in the plans.
Gross residential density	30 units per hectare for multi-family housing and 20 per hectare for single-family units.
Maximum height	Three storeys
Parking	1.5 spaces per unit, all at-grade. There are currently 444 at-grade parking spaces next to the station. By completion there will be 1,000 spaces for train users and patrons of the commercial centre.
Selling price	Initially, $115,000–$250, 000. Current prices are upwards of $250,000.
Type of transit	Commuter train to Montréal. There is regional bus service from Mont-Saint-Hilaire to the train station.
Distance to transit station	200–750 m (650–2,460 ft.)
Pedestrian connectivity	Good

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PROJECT SUMMARY — Village de la Gare

The Village de la Gare in the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire is considered to be the first, master-planned, transit-oriented development project in Quebec. The project was started in 2002 after commuter train service was introduced linking Mont-Saint-Hilaire to Montréal.

The project is the result of a unique collaboration between the municipality, the metropolitan transit authority and a private developer. At its completion in 2012, the project will include 1,000 residential units, approximately 2,300 m^2 (24,750 sq. ft.) of commercial space, a primary school, public open space and landscaping, bicycle routes and pedestrian pathways, all within 750 metres of the train station.

Nearly 15 per cent of the land area will be used for parks and public open space. To date, nearly one-third of the residential area has been built and occupied. Development will progress at the pace of about 100 residential units a year plus the adjoining green space, landscaping and pathways. The commercial and institutional phases are expected to begin in 2007. The project is scheduled for completion in 2012.

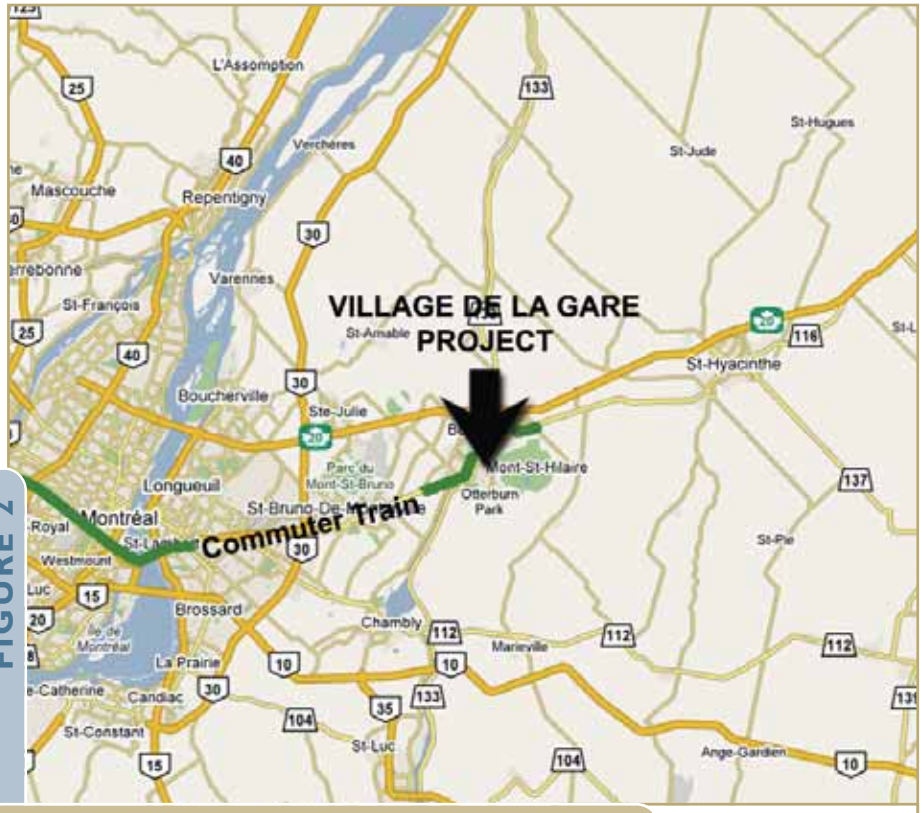

FIGURE 2

Regional context map

TRANSIT SYSTEM OVERVIEW AND PROJECT CONTEXT

Car-dependent suburban development off the island of Montréal has undermined transit use and increased traffic congestion in the metropolitan region. In response to these issues, the Metropolitan Transportation Agency (AMT—Agence métropolitaine de transport) was established in 1995 to promote public transit use, improve existing services and plan for new facilities. In 2000, AMT established a commuter line servicing the South Shore, the area directly across the St. Lawrence River from Montréal. In 2002, service was extended to Mont-Saint-Hilaire.

AMT was in a position to play a leading role in shaping development around new transit nodes such as Mont-Saint-Hilaire. Unlike other towns along the commuter rail line where there had been commuter train service, Mont-Saint-Hilaire did not have a station. When the commuter service was proposed for Mont-Saint-Hilaire, the land adjacent to the rail line was owned by a private developer, Groupe Cooke Bombardier Lesage, Inc. (Groupe CBL), which had purchased the property of a former sugar refinery nearly 10 years earlier. Groupe CBL had not established firm development plans for the site.

The AMT and the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire negotiated with Groupe CBL to buy a portion of the land for a train station and parking area. Groupe CBL worked with the AMT and the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire on site planning for Village de la Gare.

The number of riders on the Mont-Saint-Hilaire line has been steadily increasing. In 2004, the train line served 5,900 riders a day, nearly 600 of whom boarded the train in Mont-Saint-Hilaire. Ridership exceeded the short-term goal of 3,280 riders within the first year of operation.

FIGURE 3

Location of Village de la Gare next to the Mont-Saint-Hilaire train station

The regional bus service, the Richelieu Valley Transit Authority (CIT Vallée du Richelieu), has also played an important role in providing service between Mont-Saint-Hilaire and the train station, which encourages intermodal transit use and discourages car traffic between the town and the station.

Mont-Saint-Hilaire is a town of 14,000 on Montréal 's South Shore, about 40 km east of downtown Montréal. Unlike many areas on the South Shore that developed exclusively as suburban communities, Mont-Saint-Hilaire is unique for its historic character and its preserved natural beauty. The town itself has the character of a small, rural community.

Mont-Saint-Hilaire is located at the foot of a mountain, Mont-Saint-Hilaire. UNESCO has designated the area around the mountain, one of the last remaining virgin forests in the region, as a biosphere reserve—the Réserve de la biosphère du Mont-Saint-Hilaire. But growth has encroached on former greenfields and natural areas. The development of Village de la Gare relieves pressure for further development on or close to the mountain.

The development site touches the Richelieu River on the west and is bordered by the train tracks and an access road leading to a highway on the east. Areas adjacent to the site on the north and south are developed in a conventional suburban pattern.

DEVELOPER'S PERSPECTIVE

Groupe CBL purchased the property from Lantic Sugar Ltd. in 1994. The land had been used for a sugar refinery and Groupe CBL saw the purchase as a unique development opportunity in a region of anticipated growth.

Groupe CBL postponed development of the site to study the real estate market and growth projections in the Mont-Saint-Hilaire region. Although Groupe CBL considered residential development an attractive option, this would mean removing the industrial buildings and remediating the site.

In 2001, when AMT announced train service to Mont-Saint-Hilaire, the property owned by Groupe CBL was one of four sites considered for construction of a new train station. When the final decision was made to locate the train station on the Groupe CBL site, negotiations began for the purchase of part of the property for the construction of a station and parking lot.

FIGURE 4

The train station and parking lot. Mont-Saint-Hilaire, a UNESCO biosphere reserve, is in the background.

Collaboration between Groupe CBL, AMT and the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire began in 2001. A real estate report showed that the market on the South Shore was improving after fluctuations in previous decades.[1] The project's urban planning consultant envisioned the train station as a central component of the development, and began advising the Town and the Groupe CBL of potential and appropriate strategies for using the train to its greatest potential.

Transit-oriented design considerations

The design parameters for the project were mapped out in the Plan d'implantation et d'intégration architecturale (PIIA) created through collaboration between Groupe CBL, the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire and AMT. The PIIA includes the following transit-oriented elements:

- The buildings of greatest density—six-unit, multi-family residences—are closest to the train station. Single-family houses are located around the perimeter of the development, still close enough to the station—less than 750 metres—to encourage foot traffic to and from the train.
- A combination of housing types.
- Guidelines to reduce the role of the automobile, including ample sidewalks (on most streets, except those with single-family housing) and bicycle paths, on-site commercial services and off-street parking.
- Residential densities to support ridership on the commuter train; for example, a minimum of 30 units per hectare for multi-family projects, and single-family housing up to a density of 20 units per hectare. Multi-unit buildings are closest to the station.
- An environment that encourages public transit use through close proximity to the train station and pedestrian-friendly access, including sidewalks that are buffered from automobile traffic by greening.

To ensure a high-quality pedestrian environment, planning for the development featured:

- Guidelines for building placement including lot size, setbacks (three to five metres) and short blocks (130 metres) to support a pedestrian-friendly environment.
- Architectural design that references the rural and historic nature of the region, including vernacular details such as pitched roofs, dormers and deep front porches. The architecture of the station is based on traditional station designs.

All public utilities will be underground and buildings sited to preserve the view of the mountain.

FIGURE 5

A multi-unit building with the train station in the background

Parking and bicycle storage

Parking standards for residential units in Village de la Gare are lower than for conventional subdivisions in Mont-Saint-Hilaire—1.5 spaces per residential unit, compared to two. The commercial area surrounding the train station will be exempt from parking requirements, as shops and services are permitted to use the train station parking lot.

For train users there are now 444 at-grade parking spaces next to the station. A total of 1,000 spaces for train users and commercial centre patrons is planned. There are now two bike racks at the train station for about 15 bikes.

[1] Hurtubise, J. *Programme de Développement et Positionnement de Marché du Projet de la Gare à Mont-Saint-Hilaire*, Montréal (2002).

Project success and costs

Currently under construction, the project comprises single-family detached homes, duplexes, townhouses and multi-unit buildings of four to six units each. At completion, the project will include 1,000 units, with the number of each housing type to be determined as build-out continues and needs are assessed. Initial selling prices were $115,000–$250,000. Current prices are upwards of $250,000. In the Montréal CMA (Census Metropolitan Area), the median selling price from 2002 to 2006 was $175,000–260,000 for new single and semi-detached homes and $127,500–180,000 for new townhouse and multi-family condos.[2]

The total investment required for this project is estimated at $150 million by all partners. Infrastructure and site preparation costs were shared among the developer, the municipality and AMT. Groupe CBL invested approximately $6 million to cover construction of the roadway network, including lighting and sidewalks ($2 million); landscaping and tree planting ($300,000); and underground infrastructure (sewers, drinking water and buried utilities).

Decontamination costs ($400,000) were covered by the developer with the help of a subsidy from the Revi-sols program of the Quebec Ministry of the Environment.[3] The municipality and AMT paid for other infrastructure. Marketing of Village de la Gare was done with the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire. The project has been profiled in promotion materials for its neighbourhood qualities, its transit connections and its proximity to natural surroundings. Most units are sold at the time of completion. In the developer's view, the project has been a commercial success.

Municipal and AMT support

After commissioning a study of four potential sites, AMT and the municipality chose the development site and worked with Group CBL to create a transit-oriented development. The municipality also lent planning support to the project by leading the creation of the *Plan d'implantation et d'intégration architecturale* (PIIA), which established zoning and land-use conditions, architectural guidelines and transit-oriented strategies for the site.

Financially, the municipality shared some of the costs of infrastructure. The municipality completed roads to link Village de la Gare with neighbouring communities, while infrastructure within the development was assumed by the developer. The municipality also paid for the construction of the train station. The AMT purchased land for the station and parking area and paid for the construction of the parking and train platforms. No other incentives were offered to the developer.

Barriers and obstacles

The project raised some concerns among neighbours due to the relative project size, the addition of a train station and the mix of uses. These concerns were alleviated through the sharing of information during public consultation. More details are provided below in the section on Public Consultation.

For the developer, the main challenge was the negotiations surrounding site planning and cost distribution. These challenges were overcome with the creation of a PIIA and the division of costs among the three involved partners.

Key success factors and lessons learned

The project has been recognized for both the quality of the development as well as accessibility to the train. In the developer's view, the traditional architectural designs have contributed greatly to the commercial success of the project so far. The plan to create a town-like setting that is reminiscent of traditional areas in the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire and neighbouring communities has drawn families as well as couples seeking a quality environment.

MUNICIPAL PLANNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Planning objectives

Recent growth throughout the South Shore has raised concerns about the encroachment of development on agricultural land and natural areas. As a designated UNESCO site, Mont-Saint-Hilaire is at the forefront of this discussion.

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[2] CMHC, Market Analysis Centre, National Office

[3] For more details on the Revi-sols program, see CMHC's *Residential Intensification Case Studies: Municipal Initiatives* under "Urban Contaminated Sites Rehabilitation Program-Revi-sols: Montréal, Québec." Bilingual, retrieved January, 2007 from www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/inpr/su/sucopl/sucopl_002.cfm.

From a planner's perspective, the development of a former industrial site, in combination with access to public transit, provides a unique opportunity to consolidate urban zones and take pressure off greenfield areas. Mont-Saint-Hilaire planners also hoped that the development of Village de la Gare as a transit-oriented project would set a precedent for other development in the area.

Municipal process and support for the project

After commissioning a study of four potential sites, AMT and the municipality chose the site owned by Groupe CBL. This decision was based on four site criteria: functionality, traffic circulation, user comfort and urban integration.

The PIIA established site planning guidelines for Village de la Gare. The PIIA amended the municipality's traditional zoning regulations to accommodate mixed-use development and higher residential densities (the highest residential densities are closest to the station).

In addition, the PIIA set architectural and design guidelines to ensure that new buildings would fit the rural context of Mont-Saint-Hilaire and the region. The PIIA also established transit-oriented principles for bike and pedestrian movement, as well as setback requirements and lot sizes that place residences close to the street and encourage neighbourly interaction.

The municipality and developer collaborated on the creation of a concept plan that further establishes the physical planning details of Village de la Gare. The plan includes traffic patterns and the location of buildings, green space, parking areas and public and commercial services. Although the concept plan gives a general outline of the commercial area, detailed planning is not expected to begin until 2007.

The phasing of the project over 10 years allows for minor adjustments in the details of land use. For example, pending approval by the municipality, the developer is able to alter anticipated housing typologies, or shift the location of public facilities, such as the anticipated primary school, to better accommodate future residents.

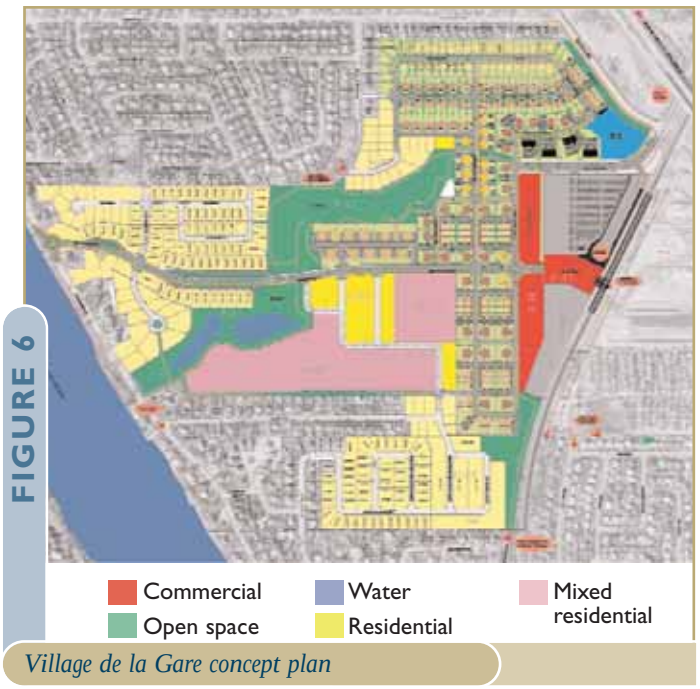

FIGURE 6

Village de la Gare concept plan

Village de la Gare required a significant financial commitment by the municipality, including the construction of the train station and some of the infrastructure costs—shared with the developer—to integrate the project into the surrounding area and connect with the existing road network. In return, the Town will benefit from an increased tax base from the 1,000 additional households. The effect of the train on reducing congestion and encouraging public transit use is also a positive outcome.

Public consultation

Initial concerns over the development concept were addressed during three public consultation meetings. Residents voiced concerns over the long-term effect of a development project of this scale—when complete, Village de la Gare will be 30 per cent of Mont-Saint-Hilaire's developed area.

Residents were also concerned that the project and the train station would increase traffic congestion in neighbouring streets. Fear of increased traffic on nearby residential streets was alleviated by providing a wide boulevard, Boulevard de la Gare, connecting the train station with the existing road network (Chemin des Patriotes).

A portion of the public consultation was dedicated to explaining and gaining acceptance for the idea of mixed-use development, especially the compatibility of this type of development with adjacent residential neighbourhoods. There was also some concern over the potential effects of soil contamination and site remediation. By providing a public forum to review and explain the plans for the project, these public consultations alleviated residents' concerns.

Challenges

From a municipal perspective, the key challenge was bringing the stakeholders together and resolving cost-sharing issues. There are limitations to a multi-stakeholder process, most importantly the need to share costs and responsibilities. In this case, the construction of the train station was the chief contribution of the Town. The AMT was responsible for the train platform and the parking.

In addition, the Town was responsible for the PIIA, which was created after much discussion and negotiation with the developer. Through the PIIA, the Town was able to set in place principles that included architecture style, landscaping, setbacks and other site-planning principles, and to shape the character of the development.

Most of the infrastructure for the site was provided by the developer. The exception was the changes to integrate streets into the existing, surrounding neighbourhoods, including the creation of a major axis, Boulevard de la Gare, from the station to the existing Chemin des Patriots. As the issues of responsibility and costs were successfully resolved, the planner believes that Village de la Gare could serve as a model of collaboration.

Success factors

Thus far, the development has achieved a sense of neighbourliness; people tend to walk to the train station and within the community. This is expected to increase as the construction of residences continues and when additional green space and commercial services are completed. The commercial centre will strengthen the “walkability” of the project by focusing on local services used every day, such as small food stores, a dry cleaner and a day-care centre.

A main strength of the project is its support of transit use, combined with the quality of the living environment. In addition to appealing to families, the project has attracted middle-aged and retired couples who can benefit from the amenities of the development as well as access to the train station.

Efforts to ensure that the automobile is not at the centre of life in the new neighbourhood have proved successful. Off-street parking alongside multi-unit buildings, narrow streets, ample sidewalks and attractive landscaping have been used to achieve this goal.

In addition, the street system has been arranged to direct traffic from major municipal roads to and from the train station with little impact on adjacent local streets and existing residential neighbourhoods. Boulevard de la Gare, for example, acts as a major artery to connect the station with a nearby highway, while short blocks discourage car traffic on local, adjacent residential streets.

At the same time, the street layout has been established to fit in with the pre-existing grid of the surrounding neighbourhoods. This strategy is an attempt to connect Village de la Gare with adjacent areas and amenities, and in contrast to the negative effect of isolated subdivisions found in many mid-20th century suburban developments.

Other success factors include the acceptance of the project by surrounding residents and the high level of investment by the municipality and the AMT in the infrastructure needed to make a transit-oriented neighbourhood work.

RESIDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

Thirty residents were interviewed during the summer of 2006 to learn why they chose a home in Village de la Gare, their level of satisfaction and their transportation choices.

Reason for choosing that location

Proximity to transit ranked high in respondents’ choice to live in Village de la Gare. Nearly half the residents surveyed listed proximity to transit as the number one factor in their decision. This was second only to proximity to nature, which was given as the main reason for locating in the development by one-third of residents surveyed.

TABLE 1 Reasons for choosing Village de la Gare

Reason	Main reason (%)	Some influence (%)*
Proximity to transit	47	57
Proximity to work	10	17
Proximity to school	0	3
Proximity to amenities (for example, shopping, parks, trails)	0	10
Price of unit	3	17
Size of unit	3	7
Architectural features (for example, layout, look of building)	3	10
Proximity to nature	33	33
Other	0	33

* Total greater than 100 per cent because more than one response allowed

As a separate question, residents were asked to what extent the building's location near transit influenced their choice. Nearly two-thirds said that the building's location near transit had a very strong influence on their purchase decision.

Two-thirds of residents surveyed paid more for their residence in Village de la Gare than the selling price of their previous dwelling. Of these, 60 per cent accepted a higher price because of design features of the home they purchased in Village de la Gare.

Surveyed residents reported a very high satisfaction rate with respect to the overall cost of living there; 83 per cent were very satisfied or satisfied in this respect. Because the project is only partially built-out, it is not surprising to find, however, that residents were not as highly satisfied with the neighbourhood character and amenities as in other case study areas.

Travel to work, shopping, school

Forty-four per cent of residents surveyed said that public transit was their main mode of travel to work, double that of the Montréal CMA average. Most residents walked to the train station and found the walk to be both pleasant and safe; landscaping and the quality of pathways were listed as contributing factors to a hospitable and attractive route to the station.

Private cars were used most frequently for shopping and trips to school and day care. However, as commercial services are completed in Village de la Gare, and with the addition of a primary school and day care within the community, the use of private automobiles may be reduced. Presently, car ownership rates are higher among residents surveyed than the Montréal CMA.

TABLE 2 Comparison of travel patterns of respondents to Montréal CMA

Travel variable	Village de la Gare	Montréal CMA*
Mode of travel to work	44% motor vehicle as driver 12% car pool 44% public transit 0% walk 0% bike	65.5% motor vehicle as driver 4.8% motor vehicle as passenger 21.7% public transit 5.9% walk 1.3% bike 0.7% other
Households with vehicle(s)	97%; 47% two or more cars	72%; 22% two or more cars†
Average time of trip to work	39 minutes (one-way)	76 minutes (round trip)‡

* Source: 2001 Census, Statistics Canada
† Source: *Spending Patterns in Canada, 2001*, Statistics Canada
‡ Source: *General Social Survey on Time Use: Cycle 19, The Time it Takes to Get to Work and Back*, Statistics Canada (by Martin Turcotte), 2005

Only about 10 per cent of residents surveyed said that their habits had changed to include more use of public transit, which suggests that many were already transit users at their previous home locations. Only 10 per cent drove less and three per cent sold a car.

TABLE 3 Change in travel patterns since last home location

Change from previous home	Work trips (%)	Shopping trips (%)
Use transit more than before	10	0
Drive less than before	10	0
Walk more than before	0	0
Own one less car	3	0

Demographics

Of the residents surveyed, incomes were generally higher than the average for the Montréal CMA, but the household size was roughly the same as the CMA average. The residents surveyed were younger than the CMA average. However, this is to be expected, given the phasing of the project build-out, with the highest density units closest to the train station being built first.

TABLE 4 Demographic characteristics

Demographic variable	Village de la Gare	Montréal CMA*
Number of people per household	2.5	2.4
Age range†	53% under 35 40% 35–65 7% over 65	21% under 35 59.5% 35–65 19.5% over 65
Household income (pre-tax)	13% under $50,000 63% $50,000–$100,000 20% over $100,000 4% don't know or refused	57.8% under $50,000 30.8% $50,000–$100,000 11.4% over $100,000

* Source, 2001 Census, Statistics Canada
† For Village de la Gare, average age of survey respondents and for Montréal CMA, average age of household maintainer(s)

SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

The strength of Village de la Gare is in the collaborative, interdisciplinary nature of both the planning and implementation phases, combining public and private investment along with the advice and expertise of professionals in the fields of economics, urban planning, engineering, brownfield remediation, residential development and public transportation initiatives.

Village de la Gare also presents an interesting case study in shared responsibilities. When costs for major undertakings such as site remediation, roadway construction, and building a train station (including platforms and parking lot) are shared among different stakeholders, complex negotiations are inevitable.

The project was also successful from a public consultation point of view. There was, for example, some debate over the potential effect of such a large and relatively dense development on adjacent areas. Also, there was much discussion regarding the compatibility of the different land uses envisioned for the site, including rapid transit, commercial services and residences. These concerns were alleviated during public consultations, which forestalled further opposition.

Proximity to transit was the most frequently cited main reason for moving there among survey respondents and nearly two-thirds said the location near transit had a very strong influence on their purchase decision. Public transit is the main mode of travel to work for 44 per cent or those surveyed, which is double that of the Montréal CMA average.

In the case of Village de la Gare, the objective of transit-oriented development was combined with a commitment to creating an environment that was itself attractive and sympathetic to its context. Transit-oriented development should not rely exclusively on the existence of public transit, rather, it should incorporate transit use within a living environment that is well-planned and attractive to its residents and its users.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Developer

Jacques Cooke
Groupe Cooke Bombardier Lesage, Inc.
785 Chambly Road, Suite 100
Longueuil, QC J4H 3M2
Telephone: 450-463-2224
Fax: 450-463-4257
E-mail: groupecbl@bellnet.caPlanners

Planner

Bernard Morel, urban planner
Jérôme Cloutier, urban planner
Service de l'urbanisme
Ville de Mont-Saint-Hilaire
100 Centre-Civique Road
Mont-Saint-Hilaire, QC J3H 3M8
Telephone: 450-467-2854
Fax: 450-467-6460
E-mail: information@villemsh.ca
www.villemsh.ca

Luc Bougie, urban planner
61 Lawrence
Bromont, QC J2L 3C5
Telephone: 450-263-0647
Fax: 450-534-1826
E-mail: lbougie@skibromont.com

Transit authorities

Emmanuel Le Colletter, ing.
Project manager, Planning and Development
Agence métropolitaine de transport
500, Place d'Armes, 25th floor
Montréal, QC H2Y 2W2
Telephone: 514-287-2464 ext. 4499
Fax: 514-287-2460
E-mail: elecolletter@amt.qc.ca
www.amt.qc.ca

Evelyne D'Avignon, directrice générale
CIT de la Vallée-du-Richelieu
630 Richelieu
Beloeil, QC J3G 5E8
Telephone: 450-464-6174
Fax: 450-464-3827
E-mail: citvr@vallee-du-richelieu.ca
www.tec.amt.qc.ca

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