

**ADDRESSING WESTMOUNT’S TOMORROW:
MAKING SMART URBAN CHANGE**

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Address at the E-Conference to Review Westmount’s Urban Master Plan

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Thank you, David. Kudos to Westmount for putting together our conference today – and a “west-coast wave” to my special friends in Westmount and Montreal.

When a community decides to renew its Urban Master Plan, it is a key moment for everyone – surely for the local government to get its act together for the future, and for citizens to make sure the things they really care about are dealt with. But it goes beyond that. A community stays contemporary, or it doesn’t. It takes on larger responsibilities for its place within its greater urban eco-systems – or it doesn’t.

Your government in Westmount has indicated that it wants to be holistic and inclusive in the issues that it tackles for the new Master Plan – that it wants to address not just the practical glitches and evident fixes, but also

take on the fundamental urban imperatives that face cities everywhere. And that is why we have gathered in this conference.

My job today is to engender that larger conversation. So, in these opening comments over the next half-hour, I will offer 4 things that I hope will be helpful to your deliberations; and then, together, we can discuss what you think is particularly relevant for Westmount. To start us off, I will cover:

- a description of those key urban imperatives that will determine the future of all of us;
- a framework for smart growth that offers a comprehensive checklist to guide the urban agenda;
- a taste of some of the directions that many cities are now taking-on, beyond past practices; and,
- a quick overview of some of the hottest new ideas that are percolating in particularly innovative places.

Let's bring up the powerpoint. Here is that agenda. As you start to see here, I want to offer, with this

presentation, a kind of photo essay, mostly with images I have taken all over the world. I will not be speaking directly to these pictures, but hopefully they enhance my words. Also, I will necessarily be speaking in summary terms because of time, but you can delve much deeper by reference to several books I have written on these important topics – here they are, for your reference.

Before we get into all of this, though, I want to emphasize something very important for Westmount. You are not starting from scratch. Westmount is a fully developed urban system. It has an extraordinary heritage and character. You are a successful city, beloved by your citizens. Westmount is intimate, it is gracious, it has a vibrant community culture, and it has a very strong identity that people connect with at an emotional level. So, while you definitely must position the city to cope with all the urgent new requirements, your next Master Plan also needs to protect and leverage the undoubted assets that are already out there. And it needs to do this in your own way, only applying what is necessary and appealing from the world's general themes as far as is sensible in your place and your time. That's how we avoid cities becoming cookie-cutter copies.

Well, let's get started.

Liveability, Sustainability, Resilience – these are the three essential urban imperatives of our time that your refreshed Master Plan must elaborate in great richness. The world is finished with just technical land-use plans with a bureaucratic bias. People now want more for themselves as citizens and users; they want more for the environment, for social and economic progress; they want more to protect them against the unexpected (as Covid has made so readily evident). And, frankly, they want plans that, when realized, will touch their hearts, not just their functional needs or their pocketbooks.

Liveability addresses how your community feels, and looks, and meets your needs. This is the deliberate design side to make the place sing. This drive to fulfillment is also what causes people to do the right thing – not because it is the law but more because it is actually what they want – delivering the experience they want in the city, for themselves and their families. Natural consumer

preferences and trends are way more determining of the shape of cities than any regulation or legal requirement.

Sustainability addresses how your community fits harmoniously within its natural and social setting, offering balanced, reinforcing features that actually enhance rather than diminish nature, that bring inclusiveness, equity, and embrace to all in the community rather than just a few, that open up economic opportunity, and that foster cultural expression to blossom. This is the side of our responsibility to the planet and to those around us.

Resilience addresses survival against the unexpected, but also planning to cope with the challenges that *can* be expected, and finding opportunity in adversity. This is the strategic side, deliberately preparing for many possible contingencies.

These three key imperatives set the prime challenge for urban change management – but how do we turn this into realistic action? Well, for me it starts with a conceptual

framework to guide all the detailed work. This framework is the simple formula of “Smart Growth” that has come together from the inquiry, experimentation, and debate of urbanists around the world. Here it is. This is about both the *urban structure* and *urban infrastructure* of your community.

From a structural point of view,

- its about the form of our communities – clustered density and mixed use and all kinds of diversity within a “neighbourhood module” that supports people, that brings people together, that creates affordability and full access to housing and workplaces, and that locals will know, understand, and feel good about; with these growth modules sitting within a context of protected open space;
- its about the fabric of our communities – green construction; and,
- its about placemaking – finding the right scale for the community and the personality of finely-designed public destinations that secures memory and identity, engendering pride and loyalty.

From an infrastructural point of view,

- its about the circulation within our communities – transportation choices from the private car to transit, cycling, and walking and all the new mobilities that are coming on so fast;

- its about social, community, cultural, and sports facilities that offer support to people, social expression and action, and stability to communities; and,

- more than ever before, its about environmentally-neutral utilities for energy, waste, and water; and locally accessing inputs, especially for food and construction.

What fascinates me about this formula is that it works over the range of challenges we face in modern life. Of course, there are many testimonials of its urgency to address environmental problems – that’s where the whole idea originated. Jane Jacobs and Richard Florida have illustrated that it is a formula for economic opportunity and robustness, particularly that concept of “diversity”.

Larry Frank, a professor at the University of British Columbia, has shown that it is the right formula to address endemic health problems focussed around the nation's growing obesity – his big push is for “active mobility”. It is interesting that all these issues, and many more, seem to come to focus under the same city lens. So this is a very useful formula.

Now, with this framework in mind, let me move from the theoretical to the specific. Picking up the key themes in that smart-growth formula, let me sketch some ideas that might be relevant specifically here in Westmount. This will only be a whirlwind tour of possibilities that people are pursuing in many places – I do not mean to be definitive or encyclopedic here, but I *do* mean to provoke your own thinking.

On the matter of *density and mixed use*: There is no question that these factors are essential – at a general level these are perhaps the most urgent fixes for sustainable cities. But, how relevant are they for Westmount – after all, you already have a nice level of density and combination of land-uses from your historic patterns? For

your community, I would argue that this agenda can be pushed forward by several *tune-ups*:

-You certainly need to test your prevailing density against the target that Canadians are realizing is a base essential for both sustainable urbanism and also to be able to afford to deliver a necessary suite of public services and amenities – we are now confirming that things start to work well at about no more than 40 units-per-acre, or 100 units-per-hectare, then get better as densities increase from there to no more than about double that base, before problems start to emerge. Many cities use the new big-site developments to fill in the density gaps and take a more gentle approach through infill in already settled areas.

-For mix, you especially have to be sure that you have the right balance between the two functions that dominate our lives – jobs and housing. This is the prime factor that will determine if people are inclined to live close to work. We tend to target at least one job for every 3 residents in a community. Where this balance is off there are all kinds of consequences, from increased traffic, to decline of local retail patronage, to withdrawal of people from the local

scene because they spend too much time in commuting and are exhausted.

-Also, for your mix, you have to audit whether or not you have the kind of workplaces that suit the economy that can support Westmount in the future. How can you convert the old-economy workspace to viable new-economy space? Do you have enough of such spaces to draw the clusters that are such an important feature of the new economy. Again, newly-developing areas can often fill the gaps.

Looking at the key factor of *diversity*: As in the previous notes, your historic pattern has offered a pleasant diversity and use mix in Westmount. Now, the inquiry about diversity has to tackle two essential factors that were not so worrisome in the past.

-Affordability, particularly for housing, but also for workplaces and retail, has become the big challenge across most Canadian cities. No town can any longer claim it has diversity if only a few people can afford to live there and if too many people are literally left on the streets. So what is the socio-economic mix in Westmount? For household incomes, many cities are

now shooting for a balanced mix of 1/3 high, 1/3 medium, and 1/3 low income households (or at least 20% for low income). And the housing has to be all mixed together. Governments are now regularly leveraging development approvals and creating partnerships to secure the median and low side – especially requiring rental housing. This is not only to serve their own citizens but also to take their fair share of a region's low-income population, so we can avoid those troublesome regional ghettos of people at risk that were such problems in the past.

-The type of households in the community is also a key question. In Westmount, as an aging community, you have lots of housing and services for children so you need to entice a new generation of families to support your existing facilities and see the housing stock re-used appropriately – and it is always good to build more family housing in apartment form at higher densities to foster affordability. You also need to make sure you have room and services for more and more seniors and those with special needs so they can stay within the community and age in place. Smart inner-city communities are shooting for a 25% provision of suitable and affordable housing for

families with children in all new multiple housing formats, and at least a 20% provision for purpose-built seniors housing. Here, again, cities are actively leveraging these kinds of households in their new development approvals or through direct investment. To me, keeping families with children in the community, not just in homes but also in apartments, is so important to the feeling of the place – a place without kids is just a dull and flat place.

Moving on to the *neighbourhood* frame: As a mature community, it is gratifying to see that Westmount has a basic urban form that emphasizes neighbourhoods and that you have neighbourhoods of vivid character. These are features to be preserved and protected with strong reinforcing strategies. The simple fact is that the more day-to-day needs can be accommodated within the neighbourhood context, the less people have to travel elsewhere, using fossil fuels and causing impacts to other people and stress on civic infrastructure – and the more they will walk and cycle. We also now see, through the Covid experience, at the urban level, that the single most important dimension of urban and family resilience during the pandemic has been the readily-available

support of your neighbourhood – and how some people were lost because they could not fall back on that. In fact, everywhere we are finding that one of the greatest urban solutions of all, addressing so many difficulties, is the extraordinary *benefit of proximity* – offered by neighbourhoods. The planning process for Westmount, as I see it, is to refine and consolidate this existing asset in two ways.

-Are your neighbourhoods complete units, with the full provision of public and private services and facilities? Here are the basic formulas we typically use, with standards for each – for scale, for public facilities, and for commercial offerings. We generally aspire to a 20-minute neighbourhood reach (by walking or cycling). Smart cities are instigating neighbourhood audits, working closely with sitting residents, to identify gaps and then systematically investing in what is needed to erase the shortfalls. As a by-product of this process, you can also deal with other neighbourhood deficiencies that limit a neighbourhood's appeal, particularly for the next generation. Your Master Plan can empower all of this.

-There are ecologies of use in a neighbourhood that cause it to be healthy and meet the array of needs of its residents. Particularly, do your neighbourhoods have the right balance of housing and commerce needed on a day-to-day basis, particularly street-fronting retail? It is vital to make sure you offer enough consumers to support the prime retail anchors and then a diversity of other retail offerings in terms of product choice and cost – and to make sure there are enough people very close-by so on-the-street shopping is as convenient as e-retail and can therefore compete with it.

Of course, all I have been talking about is tied together by appropriate *mobility arrangements*. This is all about alternative transportation options from what we see today – shifting from cars to more walking, cycling and transit. Of course, how much you can make this shift depends upon some key factors: do you have practical alternatives to the car?; are your levels of traffic congestion causing real problems?; how naturally inclined are your citizens to take up active modes? But because the car is so dominant with so many difficult impacts, and there just never seems to be enough space for the car to move and park,

everywhere some sort of significant shift to less-impactful modes is almost always pursued. Westmount is lucky on two aspects of this question. Of course, the community is linked into the rapid transit network of Greater Montreal, so you can get around and in and out of the community by public transit. Second, you have an actively developing bike network that people are tending to use more and more. But, you only have a limited street system that is hard to expand without major disruption and parking impacts. I am sure you *all* have frustrating traffic stories.

-For your new Master Plan, I would urge you to keep with the program of building more capacity for the active modes of walking and cycling – but also to think of new ways to make those modes more appealing. Maybe you need better weather protection and more drinking fountains and benches for walkers. Maybe you need more streets redesignated and more street-space set aside for the active modes – something that has become very popular all over the world during the Covid pandemic. Maybe you need to recalibrate traffic signals to favour the active modes. Some cities are finding great embedded wealth in reclaiming sprawling automobile

infrastructure lands to help pay for new mobility infrastructure.

-I suspect you also need aggressive targets for the modal shift. Surely a city as mature as Westmount can cut auto trips to less than 50% of all trips. A longer-range target might even be cutting auto trips to 1/3rd of total trips. These kinds of targets are becoming typical in progressive cities.

Now, let me turn to the *environment*. It is common wisdom today to understand that cities are putting untenable pressures on their natural environments that are causing all kinds of problems from climate change to resource depletion, to decline of public health.

Everywhere, major reforms are in the works to get our communities back in harmony with nature and to retrofit to be more resilient to climate change. I could spend hours on this one because there is so much to do – this might well be the cutting edge of your new Master Plan – a “showcase” new feature. That has certainly been the case in my city, Vancouver, where the latest chapter of master planning, called the “Greenest City Action Plan”, is repositioning us at the top of the North American green

movement. Westmount is fortunate on several fronts. You sit within a province which primarily uses renewable hydro energy. You also have a localized open space framework that is both assessable and supports nature. And, of course, you have a long-standing, popular and powerful program of heritage conservation and re-use. So, what might be your next environmental advance? Let me offer several suggestions.

- An audit of all Westmount's utilities is surely needed. You might be inspired by the comprehensive Hammarby model, in Stockholm, shown here. Can you move to the next level of energy independence and security? What about neighbourhood-based energy arrangements? How do you manage your water – collection, runoff, natural filtering – could street and park design include these features? What about a “zero waste” target – by reducing, reusing, and recycling? For example, think of “disassembly” rather than “demolition”. What can individual residents be motivated to do? – think about the old-fashioned rain barrel.

- The movement of local food access and security is gaining ground with the help of public policy – think of the popular 100-mile diet but now add edible

public landscape on streets, and community allotment gardens in parks and urban farms on vacant parking lots. London, in England now has a comprehensive “food strategy” to ensure its food security in uncertain times.

I’ll close this part by looking at the vital questions of *placemaking and identity*. Again, Westmount is in a good place with strong performance over many years in protecting your heritage and character and creating quality places. Few cities of your scale have done better. But this is a topic where you can never become complacent. Urban design and design renewal are always needed and the private forces of redevelopment can put pressure on area character, with losses before anyone really notices – we’ve all seen that.

-I hope your new Master Plan really reinforces your heritage agenda – but now the art is to move to tight infill and compatibility between old and new, more than in the past. I think your long-standing design advisory committee will become more important than ever before. I can only praise this institution.

-I hope your Master Plan will deliberately set the overall built scale that is compatible for your community – should it be like this, or this, or this? Private development can now be done at almost any scale but what works in one place does not necessarily work in another. This must be a *community* decision, not left to developers. In many cities, the real crucible for this public inquiry is when big chunks of land are comprehensively designed and developed. Of course, I am reminded here of your Southeast Sector lands. Now, let me be blunt: most people hate density because it has usually been done so badly. Scale is only acceptable to people when it is realized through great design and includes all the bells and whistles that people want. This has to do with how you line the streets; how you create the sense of “home”; and what special features are included. You get peoples’ positive attention when you design a “lifestyle” rather than a “development”. And, the only way to find your community scale and modern character is to pull both your interested and skeptical citizens into a creative “design-in” process – and work it all out on paper.

Well, there you have: a lot of ideas from many places that might work in Westmount. But, before I finish, let me bring your attention to some of the hot new ideas that are being exposed by the most gutsy cities in the world. Here is a shortlist of interesting game-changers to think about.

First we have the *shared economy*. This is not just about Uber and air-b-and-b's. In the Nordic countries, this is now about shared housing, shared workspace, and even, in Helsinki, a community-based localized currency app for sharing of home appliances and trading of personal services – completely off of the financial and tax grid.

Second, there is the concept of the *15-minute neighbourhood* with absolutely everything a household needs on a daily basis. Paris is taking the “complete community” concept to a whole new level by giving it a tight scale and making it pervasive.

Third, the world is being swamped by *new forms of mobility and integrated mobility* – autonomous vehicles, of course, will have to be accommodated, but we are

already seeing a crowd of cool new personal mobility devices and one-pay systems for multi-mode travel. Everywhere, cities are trying to catch up with these transformative technologies.

Fourth, a daring urban design movement is starting to dramatically reclaim urban space for people. They call it the “*repossession of streets*”. This is where cars are completely banished from the street setting. Copenhagen has some compelling examples. But, you have a great one right here in Montreal at the “Place Spectacle”, that I think is an indicator of things to come.

Fifth, we are just starting to see what is called the “*urban tranquility movement*”, which is to attack like never before the debilitating effects of noise in our cities – from leaf blowers to construction machinery to the roar of traffic.

Lastly, the Covid pandemic has exploded upon us new land-use trends that may change our cities forever – the jury is still out, so we shall see. Both *home-based work*

and *e-commerce* are opening up options but also raising big questions.

Well, I wish you luck in the process and outcomes for your new Urban Master Plan.

To close, let me leave you with an overarching *ethic* for sustainable and inclusive urban planning that many cities now use so they do not lose their way as they debate their future – here it is in a nutshell. It includes: *public engagement, building partnerships, insisting on explicit design, tapping the latest technologies, shaping all through a lens of equity, and never sacrificing your identity* for any other motive. This ethic needs to touch everything a thoughtful city tries to accomplish.

Thank you for your time. Of course, my words are just a teaser – there is so much on the agenda to make Westmount *great as you imagine it up to 2040*.

Now, David, over to you – let's open the floor for discussion....