

Association seeks SDC status for Monkland Village

BY ISAAC OLSON

With hopes of forming a société de développement commercial (SDC), a newly established non-profit association has begun canvassing NDG's bustling Monkland Ave., proposing the concept to business owners from Girouard to Melrose.

The Monkland Merchant Association (MMA), led by Kim Fuller, fully established itself in early August with a website (www.villagemonkland.org). Now, with the building blocks in place, organizers, which already include several of the more than 100 businesses on the proposed section of street, have started the footwork. The MMA needs a majority vote among business owners before applying to Montreal for SDC status.

What it means

An SDC is a non-profit, city-backed association that promotes the economic development of an area by taking a more community-oriented, area-specific approach to everything from street-wide events to cooperative advertising. There are currently 14 SDC districts in Montreal.

"We'll be keeping people informed and

allowing them to have a voice," said Fuller, MMA's director. "There are so many decisions the city has taken about our street because nobody had a say. Now there will be this association where people who care can stand up and say what they have to say. We can go to the city, submit our ideas and our complaints. We can be heard."

Paying dues

If an SDC is approved, all business owners will have to make an annual monetary contribution — a contribution that varies based on the business's property value and, though collected by the city, is returned in full to the SDC.

Due to a recent by-law change, SDCs can choose a varied rate based on property value and operating budgets while accounting for a business's economic and commercial character, according to the city of Montreal's website.

The contribution money, which is collected with taxes on January 1, is then used to help stimulate the local economy. The goal of the MMA is to include the interests of every business owner from dentists and restaurateurs to translators and retailers. Between offering website services, media attention and street-wide



If a local non-profit is successful, Monkland will be part of an SDC that will run from Girouard to Melrose.

Photo: Isaac Olson

events, Fuller said there is a wide-range of methods used to help an area grow.

Installing decorative lights during the holidays or bringing the street fair back to Monkland might be interesting to the shops and restaurants, but not as much to dentists or notaries, explained Fuller, who said her organization would work to provide balance for all businesses on the street by maintaining well-rounded planning throughout the year.

"We can use the contributions to foster the relationship between the residents and the stores and just putting some interest in the neighbourhood," Fuller said. "Ultimately we're also trying to encourage the residents to shop locally for a host of reasons — ecological ones to begin with — but, just, why not shop locally? How many people don't know that there are all these hidden treasures on our street?"

Positive feedback

In talking with people, Fuller said, so far, business owners and residents have been receptive to the idea.

"I'm happy people are already showing interest," said Fuller. "There has been amazing positivity across the board. It's just getting started and already so many people are encouraging us."

Getting the word out

An attempt to rally an SDC on NDG's Sherbrooke St. failed several years ago.

Fuller suspects failed attempts to garner communal support are rooted in a lack of available information made ready by organizers.

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Former Cinema V could be new home of Black Theatre Workshop

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“Now our challenge is to make the residents aware that this project is very much alive.”

Historical landmark

The Empress Theatre, an architectural eye-catcher more recently known as Cinema V, takes up more than half a Sherbrooke St. block. Situated directly across from NDG Park at the corner of Old Orchard, the Egyptian-themed building, built in 1927, once hosted burlesque performances, vaudeville acts and film screenings before becoming a popular movie theatre.

Despite the building's history and visually dominating structure, the once busy theatre has been largely untouched since 1992 when Cinema V closed its doors. It has since fallen into disrepair.

The partners' plan

Partnered with three anglophone organizations – Geordie Productions, the Black Theatre Workshop (BTW) and the McGill Music Conservatory – Empress Cultural Centre is, with the exception of Loisel's part-time employment, a volunteer-based effort to breathe life into the historic theatre.

With a 50-year lease on the building and an option for 10 more courtesy of the



Christiane Loisel, project coordinator for the Empress Cultural Centre.

Photo: Isaac Olson

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She said her goal is to provide potential SDC members with plenty of information and an established plan that estimates what business owners will pay and what the results will be.

Armed with pamphlets and a detailed website, she said there is now a “tangible entity” that people can associate with. Among plans to bring attention to local merchants and businesses, is the strategy of providing pages on MMA's website

city, Loisel said plans to modernize the Empress include a 350-seat theatre, a 125-seat black box theatre and a 50- to 75-seat cabaret space in a mezzanine.

Plans also include administrative offices, rehearsal space and more. At present, however, the building needs total revitalization, explained Loisel, as organizers look to create a multifunctional space that can be used by both professional performers and the community.

To fund the renovations and equipment needed for the project, an application was sent to Quebec's Department of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women on December 1, 2008, Loisel said. A second application was sent on March 31 to the Department of Canadian Heritage's Cultural Spaces Canada program with hopes the two departments will find a way to cover the initial costs.

Community cultural centre

While Geordie Productions and the BTW will make the Empress their home base for both rehearsals and performances, McGill Music Conservatory will be continuing its effort to bring music to the community through lessons made available to everybody from kids to seniors.

Beyond the scheduled performances and uses, the space will be available for rent to cultural organizations, explained Loisel, and although the Empress will be hosting two anglophone theatre companies, English will not be mandatory.

“It will be available for numerous activities and different types of theatre,” Loisel said. “It has the potential, I think, to be a very, very busy building.”

Black Theatre Workshop

The BTW, an anglophone theatre group with Caribbean roots now in its 39th season, is the oldest black theatre company in Canada, but has never had a permanent home. Moving into the Empress would allow the company to expand its program, according to artistic director Tyrone Benskin, who said they have always been limited by available space.

with profiles, links, photos and other information about the area all paid for by member contributions.

The website could also host information about vacant properties, Fuller said, in an effort to attract more businesses to the area.

“There are so many other SDCs like St. Denis, St. Hubert and the Jean Talon market,” Fuller said. “All these places are tourist attractions because they've created a buzz about their neighbourhoods. We're going to try and do that as well.”



Merchants in the area have longed hope for the re-opening of the Cinema V building as the new Empress Theatre, believing it could spur business on the street.

Photo: Isaac Olson

Describing the area as the heart of “Montreal's anglo-African-Canadian community” and “anglo-theatre-going community,” Benskin said the Empress Theatre's location will benefit both the theatre groups and the local community.

“The theatre is a huge economic lightening rod for the NDG community in the sense of the amount of residual entertainment-based business,” Benskin said, noting the music students, actors and audiences will spill out into local businesses like restaurants and cafes. “The potential there is absolutely huge. I think it's a win-win situation any way you look at it.”

NDG's MNA lends support

Believing in the importance of arts in community, provincial Justice minister Kathleen Weil, the Quebec Liberal Party's MNA for NDG, has taken an interest in

the project and has been supporting efforts to renovate the Empress.

Although she can't comment on the funding application's progress, she continues to show her support.

“Bringing life back to the building will bring life back to the community,” Weil said. “The part of the project that I find really exciting is the outreach aspect of the vision. The community can find a place there.”

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