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CSL council votes 5-2 to allow rezoning process for synagogue

By Joel Goldenberg

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Resident Anne-Murielle Hassan speaks animatedly with Councillor Allan Levine at the May Côte St. Luc council meeting.

Joel Goldenberg Photo

Côte St. Luc council voted 5-2 last week at a standing-room only meeting to pass a second reading of a rezoning bylaw that would enable the creation of a new synagogue on Mackle Road near Quartier Cavendish.

Councillors Glenn Nashen, Allan Levine, Mike Cohen, Sidney Benizri and Sam Goldbloom voted in favour, Ruth Kovac and Steven Erdelyi voted against, and Dida Berku abstained due to her involvement as a lawyer in a legal case unrelated to the rezoning but linked to a court case involving Fondation Sepharade Kollel Avrechim's spiritual leader, Rabbi Yehouda Benoliel.

At a recent meeting, residents raised concerns about the potential for increased foot and car traffic, noise, late night activity, lowered property values, illegal parking and lost taxes for the city from a religious institution resulting in increased taxes for homeowners, and also brought up the phenomenon of "makeshift" synagogues on residential streets.

Those council members who voted in favour said residents will have their say by choosing whether to call for a register, which could then prompt a referendum. At last week's meeting, one Mackle Road resident presented a petition, and told council that more than enough people signed to, as part of the bylaw process, potentially force a referendum.

Councillor Allan Levine gave an impassioned speech in favour of the rezoning. The councillor said while he is grateful that, in Côte St. Luc, no one would vote against him because he is Jewish, others who are Jewish don't have the same level of comfort — such as students wearing kippahs at Concordia University, and Jews living in France.

Kovac stressed that she was not opposed to the synagogue, but to the proposed location.

"I will not speak about religion or being Jewish — as a child of Holocaust survivors, I couldn't be more sensitive," she said.

Kovac explained that several years ago, the council went through an extensive and rigorous exercise of redefining the Cavendish Mall land, much of which is now residential.

"After public consultations, no one opposed the rezoning [to mostly residential from commercial] or the plans submitted," she explained. "There were no surprises. Today, we are asked to spot zone one lot to accommodate a request for a religious institution.

"The Cavendish Mall... today has voiced their very strong opposition, knowing events taking place at the synagogue would spill onto their property and that parking would become an issue for their customers.

"My vote opposed to the motion is not opposed to the Kollel. I am pro the status quo, not anti-anything else. We should work together to find the appropriate alternate location, and we will work to help you find one, or to find a way to improve your current location.

"What some of the residents have already raised is that this organization has more than one tax-exempt property, they don't have one, they don't have two, they don't have three, they have four or five. Is that really fair to the taxpayer, who this year had significant increases, and for the rest of the community to bear?" We contacted Rabbi Benoliel on this issue, and are waiting for a response.

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