# ZONING IN ON TRANSIT: What can zoning bylaws tell us about transit—oriented development in Montréal, Quebec?

## INTRODUCTION

- Transit-oriented development (TOD) has been encouraged as an effective strategy to limit urban sprawl, increase urban density, and enhance neighborhood diversity.
- The Réseau Express Métropolitain (REM), a \$7 billion light-rail transit system spanning 26 stations across the Montréal Region, was announced in 2016 by the Government of Québec.
- As policy makers in the Montréal region are aiming to orient 60% of household growth around mass-transit systems, it is important to assess the extent to which municipalities are making regulatory changes to accommodate TOD plans.



Figure 1 – Detailed map of the Réseau Express Métropolitain (REM)

## METHODS

- For each of the 17 municipalities and boroughs around the REM stations, minutes of every municipal council meeting that took place between January 2016 and June 2022 were analyzed. Zoning bylaws in effect in 2016 were also compared to the latest versions adopted.
- Land-use data was linked to each station using 1-kilometer buffers. The proportion of each usage was derived for each station, with a constructible land category aggregating all vacant and parking-lot zoning together.



### ANALYSIS

#### Results

Based on our analysis of urban plans and bylaw changes between 2016 and 2022, all stations were categorized into four groups based on their level of compliance with TOD principles.

#### Pre-existing TODs:

These four central stations made limited bylaw changes given that they are already located near metro stations and benefit from appropriate zoning. Some were able to rezone underused areas and reduce parking minimums to further maximize TOD benefits, including the provision of additional greenspace.

#### **Developing TODs:**

Out of the additional 21 stations currently under construction (excluding the airport), only four stations undertook significant bylaw and land-use changes, including the rezoning of commercial, industrial, and parking areas to allow for more compact, diversified developments and the construction of adequate multi-family housing.

#### Non–TOD With some bylaw changes:

These six stations benefited from some increased floor-area ratios and maximum building heights. However, these bylaw changes were done sparingly, despite having the highest percentage of industrial (13.79%) and available land (13.54%) out of all TOD classifications.

#### Non–TOD without significant bylaw changes:

These 11 stations implemented no or minimal bylaw changes, despite having high land availability (11.46%). These stations are dominated by low density residential areas (at 25.93% of the total land-use).



Figure 2 – REM stations classified based on the compliance of their bylaw changes to TOD principles

#### Illustrative examples

#### Île-des-Soeurs Station:

Following extensive public-consultation sessions, Île-des-Soeurs adopted a Special Planning Program (SPP) in 2020 and zoning changes in 2021 for its TOD, allowing for the redevelopment of low-density, commercial, and industrial areas to allow for higher-density mixed and residential uses.

While densification was met with push back from some residents, the updated zoning bylaws reflect many of the recommendations raised in the public-consultation sessions, especially the prioritization of public green spaces and urban agriculture.

The borough removed car parking minimums for every residential or mixed-use building and substantially reduced them for commercial spaces. Above-ground car-parking spaces were capped at 5% (as opposed to 20%) for the rest of the borough.

#### Anse-à-l'Orme Station:

This station is characterized by its high share of developable land – the highest of all stations located on the Island of Montréal – and its low population density.

While one municipality produced an extensive Special Planning Program (SPP) for this area focusing on diverse housing types, it ultimately only zoned for low-density, detached single-family houses around the REM station with a maximum density of 15 dwellings/ ha. The rest of the area was rezoned for low-density commercial and industrial use or as protected natural space, preventing development in the sector.

Minimal bylaws changes pertaining to the layout of parking lots were made while no regulations were implemented to guarantee affordable housing.





Figure 3 – Pictures of the land-use around Île-des-Soeurs station (left) and Anse-à-l'Orme station (right)

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## CONCLUSION

- Policy makers have been granted an opportunity to use LRT as a leverage to transform sprawling cities into more diverse environments. Yet, major barriers to TOD remain, from insufficient integration of transport and land-use to inadequate policy infrastructure.
- While pre-existing and developing TODs show signs of promise in term of densification and diversification of land-uses, lowdensity developments remain the norm among non-TOD cases, even in areas with high land availability.
- Ensuring that municipal zoning bylaws are appropriately designed to support mixed-land uses, adequate multi-family housing, and reasonable density around transit stations is crucial to achieve TOD goals.
- Over half of the REM stations are not subjected to affordablehousing policies. As such, increased affordable housing policies are needed around LRT stations to facilitate an equitable distribution of TOD benefits.
- Parking ratios remain mostly untouched around REM stations. Increased policy attention should be directed towards parking ratios given that they have a direct impact on available space for development, active travel behaviors, and the livability of station areas.
- We suggest better concordance between local and regional planning regulation to achieve TOD goals and maximize social benefits of mass public-transit investments.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported in part by The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) Collaborative Health Research Projects (CHRP) Program, the Fonds de Recherche du Québec - Société et Culture (FRQSC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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