



Transformed by community economic development

Southwest Montréal now has a future as well as a past

By Pierre Richard

The Southwest part of Montréal has vastly changed over the past 20 years. The old working-class districts bordering the Lachine Canal (Pointe Saint-Charles, Saint-Henri, Little Burgundy, Griffintown, Ville-Émard, Côte Saint-Paul), called the “poverty capital of Canada” in the 1980s, are currently undergoing an exceptional shake-up and revival.

Between 1950 and 1990 Southwest Montréal, the birthplace of Canadian industry, lost 75% of its manufacturing jobs, and saw its population drop from 100,000 to 70,000. We had seldom seen such a rapid industrial decline and rapid depopulation in an urban setting. With a tightly-knit social fabric and a tradition of worker solidarity, the area was ripe for the emergence of Montréal’s first experiment in “community economic development.”

In 1984, a few community organizers took the initiative to tackle economic development and employment development head-on, not by hoping for a miracle, but by organizing the area’s strengths and developing links between all the sectors. PEP (Point Saint Charles Economic Program) was born. At about the same time, similar initiatives were beginning in two other working-class Montréal districts, South Centre and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. In 1989, RESO took over from PEP and spread the economic recovery and revitalization project across the entire Southwest.

Twenty years after PEP and 15 years after the creation of RESO, no one is talking about “economic recovery” in the Southwest any more. RESO has even changed its name. The acronym no longer refers to “recovery” (*relance*), but instead to an economic and social coalition in the city’s Southwest (*le Regroupement économique et social du Sud-Ouest*).

Now talk is of a deep-seated revival and plans for sustainable development. Signs of the revival are everywhere: the re-opening and development of the Lachine Canal; employment growth that outstrips the Montréal average; the spread of Montréal’s downtown and the new economy towards the Southwest; the establishment and expansion of businesses; a proliferation of social economy

projects; a blossoming of the cultural sector; building projects; commercial revitalization ...

So the decline has been halted. But the current revival brings new challenges. Foremost is creating sustainable and appropriate development that includes that significant part of the Southwest’s population still living in poverty and exclusion.

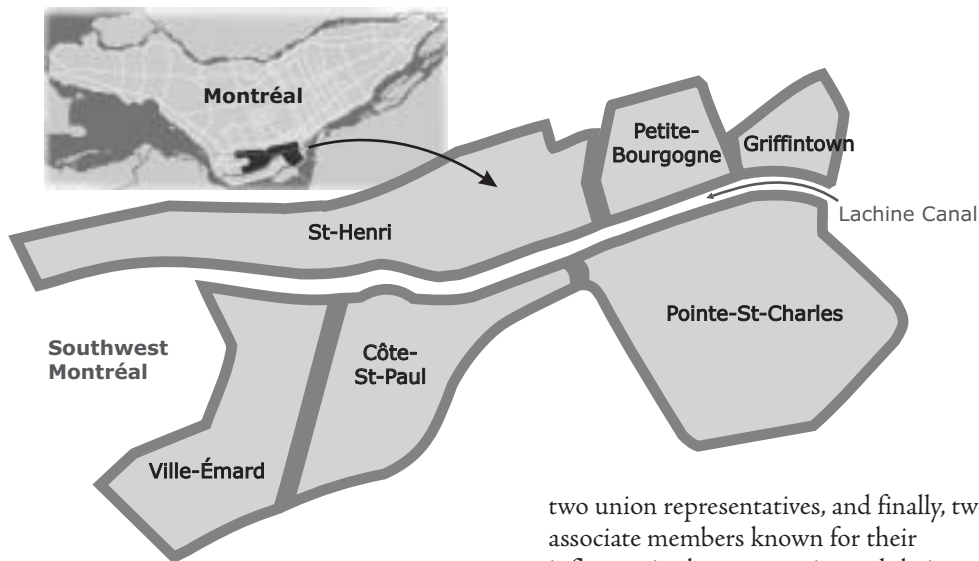
How best to explain how far we have come? What are the ingredients or critical factors in this experience of community-led economic development? What too are the limits of this experience? How will we meet new challenges?

For all its singularity, the RESO experience is part of an approach used by other Montréal neighbourhoods and other urban and rural communities in Québec and Canada. On a wider scale still, it is part of a global movement of local communities that decide to take their development and future into their own hands.

Square 1: citizen engagement

RESO is not a creation of the state, nor is it a government program, a consulting firm, or a government service or program

(above) Residents of the Southwest, enrolled in training for their high-school equivalency diploma. Photo credit: RESO.



“provider.” Yet it is financed almost entirely with public money and offers numerous services to businesses, organizations, and residents in the Southwest.

RESO, like Québec’s other community economic development corporations (CDECs), was created and developed by the community, particularly the movers and shakers of Montréal’s Southwest. These were community and union leaders, business people, citizens, and elected officials who shared both a sense of urgency about the disastrous situation of their community and the will to work towards its revitalization.

In 1989, the Committee for the Renewal of Employment and the Economy in Southwest Montréal (CREESOM – a gathering of community activists and public officials) conceived an ambitious program of revitalization measures. Its one central recommendation: that their implementation must be entrusted to an organization that was representative of different sectors of the community and accountable to the community. In other words, if it was not to sink into oblivion, the revitalization project had to be steered by an organization that belonged to the community.

And so RESO was born, an autonomous organization managed by a board of directors comprising representatives from a range of socio-economic sectors. There were four from the business world (corporations, small businesses, retailers, and financial institutions). Another four each came from community organizations in different neighbourhoods. There were

two union representatives, and finally, two associate members known for their influence in the community and their ability to bring together the diverse sectors.

Over the years, the board grew to include a representative of local institutions (health, educational, and cultural), a representative of residents using RESO’s employment services, and an elected municipal official to represent the borough.

These directors are not appointed or co-opted, but elected to a 2-year term by their peers – to whom they are therefore accountable. Twice a year, 200-250 people take part in the eight sector-based electoral colleges of RESO that encompass participating businesses, unions, community organizations, institutions, and residents. They learn about RESO’s work, debate directions for the organization, formulate recommendations for the board of directors and, every two years, elect representatives to the board.

In addition to socio-economic partners, RESO also aims to engage the citizens of Southwest Montréal. This starts with the roughly 1,000 residents who annually take part in the training, employment integration, and job search process offered by RESO and its youth employment centre. These people are more than just users of RESO services; they are invited to take an active part in the development of their area through the participant committees.

The main challenge in community participation remains connecting with and engaging citizens who don’t use RESO’s services. In spring 2000, as part of the development of the Lachine Canal, RESO organized neighbourhood forums that

attracted several hundred residents. People also show a lot of interest in the annual general meeting.

RESO’s board also wishes to create more and better opportunities and occasions for people to have their say and get involved. This is RESO’s strength, its foundation, its oxygen. Democracy is never a given; it’s always under construction.

Collaboration: the key to progress

Just as democratic involvement is the basis for RESO’s action, collaboration is its preferred way of working. RESO is not the only organization responsible for the Southwest’s accomplishments. They are the result of concerted efforts by many private, public, and community partners.

Saving important manufacturing businesses; establishing a school of advanced technology; re-opening the Corona Theatre; re-developing the Lachine Canal; employment integration businesses; increased social and community housing – all these achievements and many others required the united efforts of a variety of people who had the intelligence to look past immediate self-interest and pool their resources.

RESO was a prime mover of numerous public consultations. These were consultations on various development projects (urban planning, the Atwater market, industrial zones). A partnership forum considered the creation of a youth employment strategy for the Southwest. A roundtable of stakeholders in the cultural sector was organized for the purpose of turning the Southwest into a centre of cultural creativity and diffusion. There was a working group on housing problems, the Society for the Promotion of the Railway Industry, and a forum on municipal restructuring.

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All these initiatives brought together players from different spheres to establish joint strategies leading to concrete actions. In the same way, RESO initiated and facilitated planning processes to guide the development of the Southwest. There was the economic development plan in 1998; the employment development plan in 1999; and the recreational tourism development plan in 2001.

The originality and power of these processes lay in their involvement of hundreds of socio-economic players - businesses, organizations, unions, citizens, elected officials, etc. Most of the recommendations in these development plans have been fulfilled or are in progress because they derive from a vision shared by the community's most vibrant elements.

Employment wars: the social-economic interface

One of the central principles of CED is to connect the economic and social dimensions of development in both our thinking and our action. It sounds easy, but poses a constant challenge. Society is organized to deal with these issues separately, through government structures and programs, professional associations, and so on.

The struggle for jobs, which was where RESO got its start, is a good illustration of this challenge. The community's players initially united around the revitalization of the Southwest because of the urgency of the employment situation. Factories were closing, thousands of jobs were being lost, unemployment and poverty were growing rapidly. It was imperative to move quickly.

In the early years, RESO was obsessed with employment as a way to stop the bleeding of the Southwest. RESO mobilized to save businesses, supported small businesses start-ups, and engaged the unions in protecting jobs. It promoted the area to investors and set up a system of

outreach and follow-up with hundreds of small businesses. It gave support and advice to entrepreneurs, maintained the industrial zoning of the area, and networked between businesses and with special government programs. From the beginning, RESO offered the area's businesses diversified, professional services to help them weather the storm and maintain and create jobs. These efforts, combined with those of many partners, allowed the Southwest to stabilize its industrial base in the mid-1990s and commence a rebound.

Employment and economic development for whom? That's another question that has been asked from the start. With a high unemployment rate and a large proportion of its population living on social assistance and with low levels of schooling, the Southwest also needed to tackle the challenge of developing its workforce. It particularly needed to develop the “employability” of the population in step with the development of businesses. That's how RESO came to set up and manage employment services offering individual counselling, training projects, and internships for those wishing to join the labour market.

Over the years, employment integration businesses have been established, as well as professional training tailored to the needs of job-seekers, and a “model school” for adults who wish to complete their secondary school studies. A program responding to the needs of the black Anglophone community was launched, and RESO added a youth employment centre to its service repertoire.

Each year over 1,000 adults, young and not-so-young, take advantage of these RESO projects and activities. They've permitted thousands of Southwest area residents to build their self-confidence, recognize and develop their strengths, and in many cases, join the job market.



Training the employed workforce has also been a concern of RESO's. It is essential to the survival and development of companies and helps a person keep a job or, if necessary, find another. In the early '90s, in collaboration with a large manufacturer, a union, and a community-based literacy organization, RESO began one of the first experiments in basic education (reading and writing) right in the workplace. This allowed workers with little schooling to keep up with the technological changes that were crucial to the company's survival. Since then, these experiments have expanded and even given rise to a social economy enterprise specializing in on-site Basic Ed.

In 15 years, RESO's many innovations and projects have developed a learning culture among the companies of the Southwest. There have been workshops to train workplace trainers. Training plans have been drafted. An employee training program sponsored by the Manufacturers and Exporters of Québec to increase the productivity of small and medium-sized businesses (Tremplins Formation-Productivité) has been put in place. Some of these businesses have recently formed the association FormaPlus to help them pool resources in workforce training.

For sure, the employment battle is never really over. Having stabilized its employment in the mid-'90s, the Southwest enjoyed strong growth between 1996 and 2000. Employment grew 24% in the Southwest and only 9% in Montréal as a whole. In the manufacturing sector alone, the Southwest advanced 11% in this period, compared to 7% in Montréal. Equipped with new financial tools (investment and social economy funds), RESO ventured further afield in employment development, including recreational

(above) Staff and participants of Cuisine-About, an employment integration enterprise in the Southwest. Photocredit: RESO.

tourism, digital imaging, and culture. All this while still helping the traditional sectors get re-anchored.

The social economy has blossomed remarkably in the Southwest, creating hundreds of jobs and offering services and products to meet the local needs in a great variety of areas. Through their management methods and their deep roots in the community, social economy businesses are contributing to the democratization of the economic life of the Southwest.

Economic exclusion remains a hot topic in the Southwest. Despite all the efforts and successes, poverty remains a daily reality for a large part of the population. Despite a rise in labour market participation, which went from 54.6% in 1996 to 59.8% in 2001, levels of unemployment, poverty, and undereducation in the Southwest still exceed the Montréal average. In 2001, there were about 7,000 employable people in the area without work. Many of them need training and long-term coaching, and are dealing with problems that conventional public employment services cannot address. Economic development may have arrived, but making it accessible to everyone continues to be an issue.

A global, integrated approach

As central as it is to RESO's activities and services, employment cannot and must not be dealt with in isolation. The revitalization of an area and a community requires an approach that is diversified, global, integrated, and comes to grips with multiple issues: the development of businesses and jobs, training of the workforce, land and infrastructure development, quality of life, housing, culture, availability of services, education and youth involvement, etc.

The re-development of the Lachine Canal and surrounding area is a good illustration of this multidimensional approach. In addition to a \$100 million public investment in infrastructure (restoration of the locks, heightening bridges, dredging, and improvements to parks and roads), the main project raised many issues, hopes – and worries – for the

citizens. The population's ownership of the project and its integration into the social, economic, and cultural fabric of the Southwest were conditions essential to success.

To create them, RESO carried out a huge consultation process in the spring of 2000. Seven sectoral forums were held for businesses, organizations, and institutions, four forums for neighbourhood residents, and a final one to bring it all together. Nearly 1,000 people took part in this huge exercise that culminated in a shared vision of what development should look like. It should respect the identities of the different neighbourhoods and highlight their history and heritage. It should contribute to the quality of life. It should be rooted in the culture of the Southwest and provide jobs that are accessible to the local population.

Development proposals were put forward to open the neighbourhoods to the Canal and to preserve the waterfront for public use. A recreational tourism plan was completed in consultation with the main partners. It articulated an approach to social, urban, and cultural tourism that was respectful of the local population while offering visitors the chance to discover the area's industrial heritage and working class neighbourhoods.

From this approach arose several social economy projects, including an urban outdoor club, heritage cruises on the canal, and an international hostel targeting tourists on limited budgets. To promote these offerings and enliven the area with recreational and cultural programming, RESO created a Society for the Promotion of the Lachine Canal. It brings together private, community, institutional and cultural partners as well as representatives of the concerned public agencies.

One issue that is hotly debated in the Southwest is housing. Between the revitalization of the neighbourhood and the re-development of the Canal, the Southwest is becoming an increasingly popular area in which to live. Over the last few years there has been a boom in the construction of "luxurious" condos. Upward pressure is beginning to be felt on house prices and rents. The Southwest is in the early phases of gentrification.

How to manage this situation? How to welcome and integrate new residents while ensuring that the poorer people aren't driven out of their own neighbourhood?

To respond to these questions, RESO created a working group on housing. The group included representatives from tenants' rights groups and groups supporting social housing, from the private sector (a real estate developer and an architect), from the urban planning research community, and from the municipality. This group proposed a strategy that would create a real social mix in the Southwest, permitting the development of housing for different income levels and different clienteles, such as seniors or families with children. Among other things, they proposed measures to strengthen social and community housing (which already has a significant presence in the area), inclusive zoning (including a significant proportion of affordable housing in each large residential project), and an ownership access program for low-to average-income families.

Partnership, autonomy, innovation

Strengthened by its successes, well-rooted in the community, and supported by numerous partners, RESO still faces management issues. Here are a few of them.

First of all, the question of partnering with public agencies. RESO has always been able to count on financial support from such entities, including the governments of Canada and Québec and the City of Montréal. The basic issue is always the same: is this a partnership, or is the government farming out its work?

Over the years, this relationship has gone through a variety of phases and developments. Due to its roots in the community, its expertise, and its democratic structure, RESO has generally been able to assert itself as a partner and reject the role of a mere program provider. This debate is back on the front burner, however. Recent reforms to the Québec government have transferred local development to the municipalities and try to make it subject to local elected officials.

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RESO is currently working to build a partner relationship with the elected officials and administration of the Southwest borough created during a recent municipal reorganization. Additionally, the federal government now seems to be open to a stronger partnership with the community economic development corporations (CDECs).

A second issue, linked to the first, is that of political and financial autonomy. There is a strong consensus among RESO's board and partners that the organization must preserve and strengthen its autonomy, both of governance and of action. Of course RESO must report to its funders and deliver results. But its first line of accountability is to its community, by way of its democratic organizational structure.

The Southwest has a unique strength, born of the decision of local, elected officials at the federal, provincial, municipal, and school board levels to form a committee independent of their political allegiances. Since 1987 this Committee has met regularly, supported development projects, and maintained a dynamic, collaborative relationship with RESO's team, while respecting its autonomy.

Financially, a major limitation has been RESO's inability to generate a significant proportion of earned revenue. A few efforts in this regard have not produced the desired results. Self-financing is an area that still needs work.

Finally, a third organizational challenge is that of institutionalization. RESO has gone past its experimental phase – it is no longer a pilot project. With recognition (albeit tenuous) from government and from its local partners, RESO, like the other CDECs, has slowly become institutionalized.

This has its advantages: sustained initiatives, low staff turnover, and greater professionalism in its interventions.

However, it also poses a sizable challenge: is there still room for innovation?

Happily, life on the developmental cutting edge has a way of keeping you alert. Over the last few years, RESO has undertaken innovative projects in development of the workforce, employment integration, in the development of businesses, and in the social economy. It keeps shaking up the normative box. There is no antidote to institutional inflexibility like a community connection and an engaged citizenry.

Conclusion

Over the last 20 years "community economic development" has left an indelible mark on the evolution of the Southwest. There's no question but that the Southwest today features more economic players who are aware of their social responsibilities and more social players conscious of their economic role. Sullen and defeatist no more, the Southwest has developed a culture of collaboration and shown itself to be a community capable of pulling together and acting as one.

With transformation well underway, the Southwest is prepared to face the challenges brought about by its growth – the challenge of integrating its diverse functions (industry, recreation and tourism, housing, culture), the challenge of social diversity, the challenge of including populations that remain marginalized, and the challenge of developing a mixed economy.

PIERRE RICHARD is the Executive Director of the Regroupement économique et social du Sud-Ouest (RESO). He can be reached at prichard@resomtl.com. For further information on RESO, consult their website www.resomtl.com or phone 514-931-5737. (above) The Lachine Canal, open for pleasure boating. Photocredit: RESO. Translation: Sterling Lambert and Shannon Webb.



Unlocking Labour History

In the collective imagination of Québécois, and particularly of those active in lobbying for social rights, the names Little Burgundy, Saint-Henri, and Pointe Saint-Charles evoke the great labour struggles of the 19th and 20th century. These places witnessed the birth of class consciousness in the working class neighbourhoods of Québec. Writing in 1941, the novelist Gabrielle Roy described this world where "a group of ants live at the heart of the large furnace of industry. As soon as they begin to look for an escape, they encounter the factory's chimneys."

Today, after the disappearance of what was for 150 years the industrial heart of both Québec and Canada, and after decades of economic drifting, these neighbourhoods in Montréal's southwest are retooling. "Multimedia City" is setting up there, as are a variety of artists. While there has been a slight gentrification of certain working class neighbourhoods, the residents have not forgotten their past. When the Lachine Canal was reopened to pleasure craft in May 2002 (above), it was a local social economy enterprise, Productions Absolu Saint-Laurent, that received the Parks Canada concession to operate pleasure cruises on a section running from the Old Port to the fourth lock.

Absolu St-Laurent faced competition from four specialized companies that had operated in this market for some time. Parks Canada selected the Absolu submission on account of the engagement of the local area in the business. Funds from the **Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program** (CEDTAP) helped the business by subsidizing its market study, carried out by consultants from RESO.

Jean-Pierre Wilsey, a former community organizer in the social housing sector, created and directs the company, which employs half-a-dozen people. He wants to promote Southwest Montreal as a tourist destination by bringing to light its industrial heritage and rich social history. ■