



MOTION REGARDING THE ADOPTION OF AN AFFORDABLE STUDENT HOUSING PLAN 2020-02-13

Submitted for: 2020-02-13

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Moved by:	Adam Gwiazda-Amsel <i>Vice-President (External Affairs)</i>	Current Status:	<input type="checkbox"/> FOR APPROVAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> APPROVED <input type="checkbox"/> POSTPONED <input type="checkbox"/> COMMITTED <input type="checkbox"/> NOT APPROVED
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Issue

In discussing access to education, we must discuss affordable housing. A large portion of the student population moves away from home to pursue studies, and with this move comes housing costs. McGill students pay more in median rent than any other student in Quebec.

Background and Rationale

The Affordable Student Housing commitment of the SSMU must be equipped with a capacity-building mechanism, such that the Committee and Executive are able to educate students about their housing rights, pursue affordable housing constructions, and mobilize students against exploitative landlords. This way, the committee can focus on a variety of avenues to combat unaffordability, rather than focusing simply on construction projects..

It is important to note that moving toward affordable housing requires the active work of a committee. The estimated 25-year supply of affordable housing units will not be sufficient to alleviate the pressures of the open housing market. The plan seeks to establish practices for education and resource provision, as well as the construction projects.



Alignment with Mission

In our mandates of accessibility and sustainability, affordable housing must be given attention. The economic well-being of students cannot be guaranteed on an open market that is increasingly experiencing shortages in vacancy rates, particularly in areas with a high density of students (Plateau, Milton-Parc) where landlords are aware of the exploitability and vulnerability of this population.

Consultations Completed

In 2017, a survey was distributed to the student body to assess their housing priorities. A further survey has been in circulation this year to refine those priorities. The term sheet of the construction project roots itself in these recommendations.

An open consultation was conducted with the Legislative Council at its first meeting of the Winter semester regarding the relationship with UTILE altogether. A town hall was then held on 27 January 2020 to present the framework proposed by UTILE as well as the recommended building plans.

Risk Factors and Resource Implications

Pursuing affordable housing is a capital expenditure on a magnitude that requires immense cooperation from external entities. We are fortunate enough to have a non-profit in Montreal dedicated to seeking funding for affordable housing projects, but maintaining the student-centric nature of the work requires Executives to take the consultation processes seriously, and to educate and prepare themselves adequately for such processes.

Sustainability Considerations

The capacity-building work of pursuing affordable housing requires the serious engagement with this dossier by successive years of administration. In the first few years, this requires SSMU Executives to pursue this mandate, and requires councillors to hold them accountable. Later on, a student co-operative model will likely solicit active participation from the community that is directly implicated in this work (i.e., those living in the housing units), and they will be able to take on more of this work, relieving pressure on the Executive portfolios.

Impact of Decision and Next Steps

The Affordable Student Housing Committee will be informed that the plan has passed, along with any amendments that may come about after Legislative Council discussion. This will inform their end-of-year activities, as they plan their timeline for next year's events.



**Motion or
Resolution for
Approval**

Be It Resolved, That the Legislative Council adopt the Affordable Student Housing Plan in Appendix A

**Results of the
Vote**

In favour (21)
Opposed (1)
Abstain (1)

APPROVED



Appendix A : Affordable Student Housing Plan

This plan offers guidance to the SSMU Executive, the Affordable Student Housing Committee, and students living in SSMU student co-ops on how to build capacity and work toward an affordable housing market for McGill students. The plan aims to set manageable goals in the areas that the Affordable Student Housing Committee was mandated to work on in the 2019-2020 academic year.

A: Statement of Principles

Community housing movements are, by their very nature, radical. They aim to decommodify a market and challenge the assumption that having a roof over one's head is a privilege. They take power away from speculators and commercial developers that want to focus on the “next big thing”, rather than the security of having a living space. It is only in reclaiming community spaces that a population can hope to prioritize basic needs over the search for capital.

In educating students about their housing rights, we are able to shepherd a vulnerable population through the dangers of exploitative landlord practices that we see in our own city. Affordable housing affords students the peace of mind to work on other projects without being stressed about making rent, and ensures that those who so wish will be able to live in the same space for more than a year. Through this change, we witness a greater sense of community and community activities, as has been seen with our own neighbours in the Milton-Parc Community. A large number of students move away from their homes when they come to university, and the subject of accessible education is inextricable from that of affordable housing. Though one could argue that the University has a responsibility to safeguard its students against bad landlords, their decision to pull institutional support from Student Housing, thereby creating a higher rent for Residence students, indicates that we must take this matter into our own hands.

The Affordable Housing Committee, therefore, serves this purpose of helping students navigate this landscape. Like other housing committees, it is designed to educate and advocate for its members in matters of exploitation, and to support its members. Though the Affordable Student Housing Committee does not have all the democratic fixings of a community housing committee, one would hope that its members take seriously the duty to consult the student body on their housing needs. In particular, populations that lie at the intersection of housing precarity and the various forms of discrimination to which Members are subjected should be actively sought out when consulting undergraduates on new directions for affordable housing.



B: Direct Democracy - A Housing AGM

In the 2019-2020 academic year, a public assembly was held to gauge the needs of students with regard to the UTILE project. The 2020-2021 Committee has a duty to inform students about the current picture of housing and what is being done about it. Briefly, they need to make their existence known.

The Affordable Student Housing Committee shall hold an Annual General Meeting starting in the 2021-2022 academic year. Having publicized themselves, the Committee shall inform prospective Student Co-op tenants and other interested Members on 1) the status of SSMU's partnership with external entities that work on housing, such as UTILE, the Milton-Parc Citizens' Committee, and the Government of Canada; 2) the results/deliverables stemming from those partnerships; 3) the legal rights of tenants and common practices enacted on students such as, but not limited to, rent hikes above the maximum amount, the insistence on illegal security deposits, and neglect of units badly in need of repair; and 4) any activities, tenant strikes, or other programming the committee has planned for the rest of the year. The presentation of these dossiers will allow students to implicate themselves in the work of the Committee on a more meaningful level. It is recommended that the AGM of the Committee be held in late February, as lease renewals for student populations often begin in early March.

The AGM should be the principal instrument to direct the work of the Affordable Student Housing Committee, as it is a space to discuss the main issues and aspirations of the student body with regard to housing. By 2023-2024, the Affordable Student Housing Committee should be co-sponsoring this event with Student Housing and Hospitality Services or the Inter-Residence Council, with whom the Committee should aim to establish a solid relationship given the overlap in concerned populations.

C: Consulting With Community Partners

When working on affordable housing for students, the SSMU must be creative in its partnerships; it is not always obvious which organisations, student groups or otherwise, have important expertise to offer on matters of affordable housing. The Committee should, in its first five (5) years, aim at a greater representation of this diversity of expertise in its voting structures through reserved spots for groups that wish to occupy a key role on this dossier. The SSMU must understand, however, that community organisations are themselves incredibly busy, often working over capacity with few resources, and should therefore not be incessantly contacted if they are too occupied with their own projects. Groups that have been involved in the early stages of the SSMU's work on affordable housing, who provide promising avenues for co-creation in the near future, are:

1. The Milton-Parc Citizens' Committee (MPCC)

The residents of Milton-Parc first worked toward broad-spectrum cohesion in the late 1960s, as peers working on a huge anti-gentrification movement to save their neighbourhood.

Through the Citizens' Committee, residents used a variety of tactics to take action against Concordia Estates Ltd., a group of speculators that wanted to build high-rises. They were able



to take six blocks of land off the private market - these blocks are now owned by the residents who form the Communauté Milton-Parc (CMP), the legal entity responsible for managing the properties and for planning for the future of the organisation.

A good deal of institutional knowledge rests within the MPCC, and this knowledge should be leveraged to understand how citizen-controlled housing can work. Many members of the MPCC's Board of Directors have a good knowledge of the structure of the CMP, and are active members of the resident co-operatives. Successful collaboration with the MPCC could mean inviting guest speakers to present at the SSMU Housing AGM (by 2023), active participation in Milton-Parc's goal to secure the Royal Victoria and Hotel-Dieu buildings for affordable public housing (ongoing through the Community Affairs Coordinator), and inviting willing MPCC members to consult on how to optimize democratic participation of student residents in the SSMU's decisions on housing projects.

2. The Legal Information Clinic at McGill (LICM)

The LICM provides McGill students and others with information related to tenants' rights, among other things. As such, they are uniquely situated to understand the common problems faced by students with abusive landlords and the common gaps in information that students suffer from.

Collaboration with the LICM could mean a yearly visit before the AGM to understand how best to communicate housing information to students (ongoing) and an invitation for dialogue at the start of the year, before LICM reaches capacity with other projects, to work on an event or project related to housing rights (from 2022).

3. The Housing and Job Resource Centre at Concordia (HOJO)

Like the LICM, HOJO fields many questions about housing rights and responsibilities. While they have the unique advantage of specializing in this domain, they are localized to the Concordia population and thus have less expertise in dealing with the realities of students living in Milton-Parc and the Plateau Mont-Royal, areas of particularly high density for McGill students. Notwithstanding, HOJO runs information workshops to generally address tenants' rights, and these events can be publicized to the student body and supported by the Committee.

Assuming a SSMU construction begins in 2020, HOJO should be consulted from 2024, as the project nears completion, to plan the introduction of a first wave of students. Having experience with their own Woodnote Student Co-operative, HOJO is uniquely situated to understand major challenges that exist when a student association, or its partners, manage properties on behalf of their membership.



4. The Unité de travail pour l'implantation de logement étudiant (UTILE)

From 2012, the student movement has become focused on affordable housing, as mentioned above. The incarnation of this focus is UTILE, a non-profit organisation founded by former actors in student associations around Quebec. UTILE aims at constructing and managing affordable housing complexes for students studying in Quebec, obtaining salaries in the form of service charges during the construction of a property. As a non-profit, the group is prohibited from retaining additional profits above their fixed salaries, but instead must reinvest rent back into their project. While this could take a number of forms, the UTILE model involves investing earnings into a fund for affordable housing, the PUSH fund, which is used to finance future constructions. That is, every apartment built with UTILE actually makes it easier to finance a future construction.

UTILE additionally helps maintain a centralized online platform with information about student housing called likehome.info. The SSMU Executive, and in particular the Vice-President (Internal Affairs) or a delegate, should aim to have this website become common knowledge for the McGill student body. This can be done through the creation of a 'housing' resource section on the SSMU website (by 2022) and by leveraging partnerships with SHHS to create a similar one on a McGill webpage (by 2025).

If a SSMU Affordable Student Housing Fee passes, a relationship with UTILE becomes self-evident. The Legislative Council voiced its desire in January 2020 that the first student housing construction be in partnership with UTILE, facilitated by the Vice-President (External Affairs). A framework for the term sheet, presented with the referendum question, outlines the priorities voiced by McGill students at the January town hall, in the 2017 UTILE survey, and through a qualitative online survey in 2019. Throughout the construction, the Affordable Student Housing Committee should be engaged in active consultation with UTILE and students regarding the interpretation and implementation of the commitments outlined in the term sheet (2020 through to 2025) and should use the Housing AGM to this effect. Should they arise, other non-profit groups working toward affordable housing for students could also be sought out for partnerships with regard to consultation or construction.

5. Other

Community organisations such as QPIRG, McGill's School of Urban Planning, CKUT, Project Genesis, and ECOLE have all done important work on issues around community poverty as it relates to the commodification of housing. While they were regrettably not involved in the initial steps of the SSMU Housing commitment, these groups and others should be invited to dialogue with the Committee at the start of each year in the event that they have an interest in working on projects that intersect with the goals of the committee. Additionally, the School of Urban Planning shall maintain a seat on the Affordable Student Housing Committee, allowing



the SSMU to leverage the ability of the School to conduct feasibility studies in the form of applied courses called Studios.

D: Advocacy & Projects

1. The UTILE project

Dependent on the passing of an Affordable Student Housing fee, the SSMU will work to ensure that project timelines are in harmony with our internal procedures, which establish a five-year maximum for fee levies. That is, the SSMU will work with UTILE and funding sources to ensure that projects can be financed and completed on a five-year timeline. Any savings will be spent in a way consistent with the SSMU's democratic processes: projects shall be decided by the Affordable Student Housing Committee and reported to the Legislative Council, which reserves the right to approve or overturn decisions of the Affordable Student Housing Committee. The Legislative Council does not, however, reserve the power to defy contractual agreements, and so any decision to partner with UTILE on a construction will bind the SSMU to the term of the agreement unless the parties enter into a legal renegotiation or annulment of the contract.

As mentioned in section C., a partnership with UTILE affords the possibility of using housing revenues to finance a future construction. Five (5) years after the initial fee referendum, the fee will be doubly adjusted - upward to account for inflation, and downward as a function of revenues collected from apartment rents. The SSMU will then run a renewal referendum campaign with the goal of financing a second construction with UTILE and to pursue any other projects which may be realised with savings in case the SSMU or UTILE can secure additional funding from external partners, above what is anticipated.

2. Hotel-Dieu, Royal Victoria, and l'Institut des Sourdes-muettes advocacy

The SSMU recognizes that large hospital conversions with incredibly complex zoning restrictions are not feasible property management scenarios for early phases of a student housing initiative. Nevertheless, many Montreal groups interested in social housing have expressed the need for sustainability and housing considerations in the transformation of these properties. Such movements are currently facilitated through the Communauté Saint-Urbain and other, less formal coalitions. The SSMU, through its relationship to the Milton-Parc Citizens' Committee, has been included in these deliberations.

As part of a commitment to a holistic movement toward decommodified and affordable student housing options, the Office of the Vice-President (External Affairs) shall continue to be involved in advocacy aiming at public ownership and management of the three vacant hospital spaces of the Hotel-Dieu hospital (including La Cité des Hospitalières), Royal Victoria hospital, and Institut des Sourdes-muettes. The SSMU recognizes that the conversations surrounding the conversion of these spaces are inextricably linked, but that each conversion must take into account its unique geographical realities. For example, it is more feasible to



integrate considerations for the homeless community into the Hotel-Dieu conversion, whereas the Royal Victoria conversion is out of the way for the homeless community of Milton-Parc.

In the interest of students, the SSMU's advocacy will include pushing for intergenerational housing and social economy in these spaces, such that the activities of the spaces can benefit the student body as well as the community-at-large. It is admittedly difficult to determine the timeline that this advocacy follows, given the degree of consultation required by municipal best practices.

3. Tenants' Committee advocacy

It must be stressed that constructions cannot serve as a magic solution to the housing crisis currently affecting Montreal and Montreal students in particular. With vacancy rates below 3% and frequent price-gouging, "renoviction", and other practices by predatory landlords, the SSMU must undertake a serious commitment to mobilize its membership in the name of affordable housing.

The Affordable Student Housing Committee, with the support of the Offices of the Vice-Presidents of Internal and External Affairs, should aim to publicize to members the various methods of negotiating rents with landlords¹ and educating student tenants on their housing rights²³. This must be done both online and in-person in order to capture the degree of nuance needed in educating vulnerable tenants about their housing rights. To facilitate this education campaign, the Affordable Student Housing Committee should endeavour to visit student tenants in high-density areas, and in particular Milton-Parc, to encourage students to dialogue with their neighbours such that students can protect one another from predatory landlord practices.

Additionally, the Committee should endeavour to find a (group of) tenant(s) that are interested in forming a housing committee within each apartment complex, with the goal of establishing one apartment complex tenants' committee per two (2) years. This idea is to be mentioned to students during the door-to-door visits, with the sharing of the organizers' contact information where consent has been given. Such committees will then be able to share these resources with one another, alleviating the work of both Executives and Committee Members going forward.

4. Projects with the Communauté Milton-Parc

A commitment from the SSMU toward significant relationship-building efforts with the residents of Milton-Parc began in 2008, and stigma around student presence in the area is

¹ [Régie de logement tool on assessing proper rental prices](#)

² [Likehome resource guide for tenants' rights](#)

³ [Housing and Job Resource Centre \(Concordia Student Union\)](#)



beginning to disperse little by little. While full integration within the governance structures of the Milton-Parc Project is unrealistic for a transient population such as a student body, it has recently become the desire of the Milton Parc Citizens' Committee to explore the possibility of brokering a joint project with SSMU and the Community Land Trust managed by the CMP corporation.

It is difficult to put a timeline on such a project, which depends heavily on the availability of funding, the availability of a space ripe for a housing project, and the political will of the residents to pursue such an initiative. Nevertheless, given the availability of a surplus in the Affordable Student Housing Fund achieved through additional external funding, it should be one of the primary goals of the Housing Committee, in particular through the Community Affairs Coordinator, to explore using this money in the co-creation of an intergenerational housing initiative with the residents of Milton-Parc through the aforementioned bodies.

APPROVED