

Heritage Montreal wants St. Columba preserved

Bumbaru: All churches should be protected by city

BY ISAAC OLSON

The fact that developers are looking to demolish the former St. Columba Anglican church at the corner of Hingston and NDG avenues to replace it with townhouses speaks to a much greater issue in the city of Montreal, according to Heritage Montreal's Dinu Bumbaru.

"Protecting a building is not like protecting an old document or painting that you can put in a museum vault," said Bumbaru, policy director for Heritage Montreal. "A building has to find a use."

That use, said Bumbaru, could be integrating it into the city's infrastructure instead of constructing all-new buildings like the Benny Library and Cultural Centre. The current owners of the St. Columba church say it would be impossible to retrofit the building with residential units and no religious institutions have the funding to repair the existing structure. However, Bumbaru argues the city of Montreal has an annual budget of more than \$4 billion and most of that goes to basic services like

garbage and snow removal.

"But can't the city have a more proactive role in these issues," said Bumbaru. "This is not a surprise. This is something that has been expected to happen for the last 20 years. Perhaps they could instead find a way to integrate the land into the public estate."

The city is building brand-new community structures throughout the area, he explained, whereas these old buildings could be retrofitted as libraries and community centres instead.

The congregation built St. Columba in 1920 and its first mass was held on December 24 of that year. The parish dissolved 92 years later in 2012. In its online inventory of Quebec's cultural sites, the Council of Quebec's Religious Heritage states that the building is ranked "low" in regards to its historical value. However, Bumbaru questions that ranking process. The criteria that designates buildings' heritage value is "not so transparent" and his organization has been trying to get more informa- *continued on p. 19*

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tion on this ranking process for quite some time, he said.

Bumbaru argued that the provincial government has site designation quotas, meaning only a certain amount can be ranked of the highest historical value. St. Columba, he said, should not be overlooked for its historical significance.

"It's a rather modest building, but it has a strong presence in the area," said Bum-

baru, noting the church's entire property integrates well into the neighbourhood. Some buildings, he said, are younger than this one and are given historical designations. "[St. Columba] can be adapted. We feel just letting it go to be replaced by yet another condo project, which we already have tons of, that don't enhance the personality of the neighbourhood but, instead, take from it, is very unfortunate."

Townhouses, not condos, are proposed for the site.