

MONTREAL

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THE CITY OMBUDSMAN works to ensure Montrealers' rights are upheld, but Johanne Savard reminds residents: 'I'm a last resort'

An ally when other doors are closed

ROBERTO ROCHA THE GAZETTE

Note to Montreal residents: don't go to the city ombudsman complaining about poor labour relations or the rotten attitude of an elected official.

She's there to resolve what city bureaucrats won't.

"I'm the last resort," Johanne Savard tells community leaders, activists and advocates on her current promotional blitz. As the city watchdog and the designated sentinel of the newly minted Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities, Savard wants to make sure people understand what she can do for them — and what she can't.

She can, for instance, put the heat on a borough office that refuses to salt a dangerously icy sidewalk when countless calls to the mayor's office do nothing.

But she can't address the acts of elected officials or solve problems regarding the Montreal Transit Corp. The Montreal police department is also verboten.

"The police have their own ethics commission for those matters," she recently told a concerned resident in Notre Dame de Grâce.

The ombudsman's office has existed for three years, but few Montrealers know about it and even fewer know its powers. But that's changing.

In 2004, the office received 207 complaints. The following year, that number more than doubled. "We don't see that as an increase in problems, but that more people are starting to know that we exist," Savard said.

"We hope to have an acceptable level of notoriety in about five years."

During the office's first year, a man complained to Savard that the municipal court listed him as having a criminal record, information that was accessible to anyone, even though he had been acquitted of committing a crime. Savard got the court to destroy such files at the complainant's request.

Other residents were frustrated with the fact city-owned trees harboured a honeydew-secreting insect, because the sap-like fluid is a nuisance to remove when it gets on cars. Savard incited bor-



JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

Johanne Savard is the city's ombudsman. The office has existed for three years, but few Montrealers know about it, or what it does. Part of Savard's job is to enforce Montreal's new Charter of Rights and Responsibilities.

ough managers to agree to spray the trees with a mild soap that repels the pest.

The ombudsman emphasizes time and again that she's a last resort. Prob-

lems should first be addressed to a resident's borough office.

"Three-fourths of cases get solved at that level," she said. Once a dispute reaches her team of seven full-time em-

ployees, it gets resolved eight out of 10 times.

With the Montreal Charter in effect since Jan. 1, the first of its kind in North America, Savard's hope is for residents

to know and demand their rights now engraved in city law.

In her own words, "the charter was made so there are no complaints."

"It's a mission statement for the city," said city councillor Warren Allmand for Côte des Neiges/Notre Dame de Grâce. "It sets principles to act and live by."

Among its objectives: support the development and diversity of culture, promote access to shorelines and parks and ensure no citizen is denied drinking water for economic reasons.

The document will do little to change the power structure or even the services the city offers, its founders admit. But that's beside the point.

"Its long-term goal," reads the Charter's introduction, "is to redefine citizenship in Montreal."

Marvin Rotrand, another N.D.G. city councillor, remembers that when he was first elected, the idea of democracy in Montreal was simply voting every four years.

"City council didn't have a question period. There was no point of access in city hall for citizens," he said.

The Montreal Summit in 2002 united grassroots activists who spawned the idea of a city charter. The Montreal Democracy Task Force was created and charged with writing the first draft.

The charter was unanimously adopted at a June 2005 council meeting.

Along with the charter came the idea of a city ombudsman. A yearly budget of \$700,000 makes the office, in Savard's words "a very cheap insurance policy."

Its success so far has forced the office to step beyond its mandate. So many people call in wondering where to go with a grievance that Savard's staff must act as a referral service.

"It's not our job, but we're pointing callers to people who can solve their problems," she said.

The ombudsman's office can be reached at (514) 872-8999.

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Secret Hydro papers found

Highly classified documents detailing new security measures at Quebec's power corporation were discovered on a bench on the platform of the Papineau métro station in east-end Montreal.

The documents, totalling about 300 pages, were found recently in an abandoned suitcase by an employee of Radio-Canada, the CBC's French-language service.

The documents belong to a Hydro-Québec security adviser; a Radio-Canada television report said yesterday.

The latest security leak at the crown corporation follows a Radio-Canada report last year in which a camera crew managed to enter a hydro dam unimpeded, raising questions about security around the province's power installations.

The documents discovered in the subway station detail Hydro's response to the security leaks discovered last year.

According to Radio-Canada, one document contains explicit descriptions of alarm, video-surveillance and anti-sabotage systems. The papers also allegedly reveal temporary passwords to access various security systems and the home phone numbers of company executives.

A Hydro spokesperson said the briefcase was stolen March 10 from an employee. "It's a very unfortunate situation," said Marc-Andre Chamberland. "As soon as the theft happened, we tightened security measures so that these types of documents, among others, will never leave Hydro-Québec."

CANADIAN PRESS

fasttrack

Jury still deliberating

The jury in Martin Morin-Cousineau's second-degree murder trial completed a third full day of deliberations yesterday without reaching a verdict. The jury has been sequestered since Thursday, trying to determine whether to acquit or convict the 31-year-old suspect in the death of Kelly-Anne Drummond, 24. Drummond died after a steak knife entered 9.5 centimetres into her skull. The defence argued she was accidentally hit by the knife on Oct. 30, 2004. Deliberations continue this morning.