



What's right with Westmount Park /1

Description

A discussion of the 2020-21 Revitalization Plan for Westmount Park

By Wanda Potrykus

Like a much-loved friend, our park needs an ongoing, healthy dose of TLC

Despite the **Stantec 'Revitalization' Plan** currently on the Council table (and the City website), which gives the impression the whole park has to be dug up and 'revisualized' and 'revitalized' at considerable cost for 21st century Westmount citizens and visitors, there's a lot that's still very A-okay with Westmount's namesake central park that a concerted amount of ongoing maintenance would ameliorate considerably without destroying what many of us already love and appreciate.

What needs fixing

Many residents have their own list but mine (and that of many others) includes:

- **Refocusing on the natural elements** – birds, butterflies, bees, insects, flowers, vegetation, etc.;
- **Naturalizing the lagoon** (see below for details);
- **Repairing and maintaining existing paths** and fixing drainage issues;
- **Repairing the mechanism of the flower clock** at Sherbrooke and Lansdowne;
- **Adding more swings to the children's playground;**

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already love and appreciate.

- **Reinstalling “Scruffy/Scarfy”, the mosaiculture dog**, at the Lansdowne entrance to the park and maybe installing more mosaiculture sculptures at some of the other park entrances and/or in some other areas of the park. Residents and visitors alike love these living sculptures;

(Could that be a possible expanded role for one of the abandoned and neglected working greenhouses that need to be repaired and repurposed rather than torn down? Westmount horticultural department may no longer grow its own flowers but there is a need for training horticultural and other public works employees and revisiting this space and maintaining its former role in beautifying our city. Make one a centre for mosaiculture sculpture training, maintenance and production perhaps?)

- **Establishing more sheltered areas for seniors and parents with young children to sit.** With the installation of the dog run, we lost a lovely, sheltered area with conifers that blocked the wind. And those conifers were never replaced anywhere. If the Stantec proposal to eliminate certain paths goes ahead, we will lose even more seating overlooking the waterway and the ducks;
- **Replacing and pruning the trees and some of the berry-bearing bushes and vines** that have been removed in recent years and not replaced to the detriment of birds, butterflies, insects and other wildlife;
- Making the passageway along the back of the library and the greenhouses to Lansdowne Lane **a more attractive gateway to the park** that will improve the view from the library windows. A wisteria trellis perhaps? A wisteria variety called Lawrence, which was bred in Canada might be a good choice;



Example of a trellis – Image: via Pinterest

- **Making the central outdoor gym/table tennis area more of an intergenerational play centre.** This would include the installation of more 'inspirational' and useful [adult/youth gym](#) equipment. What's currently there is inadequate at best. Plus reconfiguring the placement of the two existing 'lonely' chess tables to allow observers to sit and watch others play and to encourage active learning. Maybe add a couple more tables, in addition to levelling out the 'heritage' ground-level chessboard area and providing playing pieces.
- **Re-establish the position of full-time park superintendent based in the park** with an office created inside some of the unused space in the comfort station. (The previous office used to be in the greenhouse area). This could also become the centre for leaflets explaining the park rules as well as nature and other info. And if the large-size chessboard play area is refurbished, it could be where players pick up/rent/return the play pieces.
- Longer-term, **moving the dog park to another area of the park.** Visually it spoils the Lansdowne entrance to the park, it's too small, and far too scrunched where it is, plus it smells bad and spoils the enjoyment of those sitting by the lagoon. However, so much money was invested in its current placement, logistically this becomes a project for some time in the future when all the other, more necessary, refurbishments are done.



If I had my preference, I would move it to the forlorn and little-used area between the football pitch and the (ugly) Centennial sculpture. There are more space and air movement there as well as parking for those who bring their pooch to the park in their car and it won't impede passing pedestrians.



Innovative sheltered sitting area – Image: courtesy of culture.pl

What doesn't need fixing

And what the final plan shouldn't include is:

- **Placing covered bike racks at the Lansdowne entrance to the park.** I presumed the whole purpose was bonifying and beautifying our park. Nothing says 'beauty' more than several rows of ugly bike racks, covered or not. Put them along the side of the Westmount Park United Church hall on Lansdowne Lane (alley) if you must. You won't see them from the church hall windows, or as you approach the park entrance.
- **Putting lights in trees.** No thanks. I like the dark skies in the park at night. The Washington lampposts are sufficient – very Narnia-like in places.
- **Eliminating the Shakespeare in the Park dell** by removing the pathway. Nothing is more magical than watching the sunset and moonrise while attending a live theatre or cinema performance in this space. Plus it's easy for crowds to disperse in various directions.
- **Establishing only one event area in the park.** The new event location is too closed in and has only two entrances, one of which is up steps (no good for seniors and those with limited mobility, such as wheelchair and walker users), the other exits onto the crowded children's play area path. Neither work for easy dissemination of crowds, especially after dark.

Plus, Stantec's plan shows both these exits are onto what has been deemed secondary paths and are not



supposed theoretically to be lit at night or cleared of snow in winter so not a good idea for ageing eyes or those with poor sight and parents with toddlers. This new event area might work for the summer afternoon concert series but since there is no fixed seating it also won't work for seniors unable to either sit on or get up from the grass, or unable to carry a folding chair into the park. Ergo they won't be able to attend the concerts.

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- **Destroying the working greenhouses.** Don't do it. I miss the tropical greenhouse and the sight of children exclaiming about the bananas and the other tropical fruits and flowers. Make one of them into a 'nature in park' exploratory area with teaching panels and workshops that can offer courses in mosaiculture or growing bonsai trees, or making seasonal wreaths, etc.
- Don't put **granite walkways** on the green roof of the Rec Centre. The existing pathways are fine. Granite is costly and heavy. Use the money to create a year-round accessible [labyrinth](#).

It's a perfect place for it (no trees) and an interesting activity for all ages and abilities. A 4000+-year-old 'innovation' that's visually intriguing. Good for stimulating right brain activity, encouraging walking meditation, 'being in the moment', mindfulness, stress therapy, and calming the mind as well as stargazing at night. It would be useful in future anxiety-filled pandemic times. There are also examples of North American indigenous labyrinth designs, so it's not only of Indo-European heritage. It would make a wonderful addition to our green roof. Establishing a butterfly garden here is also a good idea.

"In general, labyrinth walking is said to benefit participants by allowing a temporary suspension of so-called left-brain activity – logical thought, analysis, and fact-based planning – and encourage the emergence of the intuition and imaginative creativity associated with the right brain."

– [encyclopedia.com/medicine/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/labyrinth-walking](https://www.encyclopedia.com/medicine/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/labyrinth-walking)



A lavender walking labyrinth to delight the senses and calm the mind – Image: via Pinterest

Green spaces and blue spaces

Most of us are familiar with the term ‘green spaces’ in our urban landscape but there is a less familiar term ‘blue spaces’, which refers to water elements and includes ponds, streams, rivers, lakes, fountains, etc. and which are deemed essential for health and welfare of city residents. Our park has a beloved ‘blue’ space that many are loath to lose in its present form.

“Blue space as an urban design term stands for visible water. Harbourfront parks, rivers, ponds, lakes, ports, canals, fountains, etc. are all counted as blue spaces. It is an important physical and aesthetic element of landscape design.”

– University of Newcastle: 2016-2017.nclurbandesign.org/2017/01/urban-design-public-health-blue-space

The lagoon does need ‘revitalization’



In terms of the plans for Westmount Park, our existing waterway definitely has to be reconstructed so there's no escaping that fact. Soon there will be new Montreal island-wide municipal environmental laws coming into effect that will forbid the use of treated municipal water for filling ornamental ponds and streams in our parks. Thus, as already happens in most of the modern-day commercial water parks (which are huge users of multiple gallons of water), all water used will have to be a closed-loop system, such as the Stantec plan is proposing for our much-beloved waterway.



Westmount Park lagoon – Image: Andrew Burlone

This is the one element in the Stantec plan that is going to have to be implemented in one form or another, especially since our beloved lagoon and stream waterway already has a leaking membrane and needs to be refilled several times a season. This is also likely to be one of the most costly, but long-term most beneficial element, environmentally speaking, of our park revitalization plan and is the one we need to embark upon sooner rather than later.

Thus, **Recoup, Revitalize and Reuse**... is certainly necessary in terms of our park water features. But there's another R-word that could also apply – and that's **Revisioning**.

Revisioning – Let's think outside of the box

As regards some of the other expensive proposals from Stantec, let's think outside of the box on how best our tax monies can be spent. Thus, if it is eventually deemed advisable to move the existing splash pad from the corner of Sherbrooke and Melville (though I'm truly not convinced that the cost is warranted) to a new location in the expanded children's playground area, I propose the following idea be considered: **Convert the Melville splash pad into a combination fountain/adult ice rink** (see details below) rather than re-purposing the current location as a rather 'yawn-making' fountain that appears in the Stantec drawing remarkably like the old splash pad it technically replaces except with new water spout jets creating sprays that are supposed to represent sails.



These, we're being told, are to remind us all of the Westmount Park toy sailboat pond of bygone years, which along with the air bridges, are being sold to us as 'heritage' features. Sounds more like phenomenally expensive 'consultant dream-speak rationale'.

'... if the decision is made to move the children's splash pad to the children's playground area, the City should seriously consider spending some extra funds on constructing a combination permanent splash pad and outdoor ice rink here too... The technology now exists to do this...'

Splash pads are nice as are outdoor ice rinks

Thus, if the decision is made to move the children's splash pad to the children's playground area, the City should seriously consider spending some extra funds on constructing a combination permanent splash pad and outdoor ice rink here too, thus amortizing the use of both these costly features over two seasons of use in a year rather than just one (very short) one. The [technology](#) now exists to do this and it makes far more sense than renting and installing a costly outdoor rink each winter in a temporary space in the park and having a splash pad area sit mostly unused for most of the year.

In fact, if we have the extra cash to do it, why not also, as suggested above, re-purpose the former Melville 'splash pad' into a combination youth-adult splash pad/fountain/ice rink as well, since it's not likely adults or teenagers are at risk of 'dashing' into Sherbrooke Street traffic? That way the younger kids have a safe space to get wet in the summer and to learn to skate and play in their 'playground' area during the winter, and the adults and youths have their own multi-season play space a 'safe' distance away? A win-win on all fronts I would think?



Maloof Skate Park in Washington D.C. – Image: [Cooldavid](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

Skateboarders still need a place to play too

I'm not sure if the proposed repurposing of the existing Melville splash pad into a fountain would disrupt its current use in the off-season months by the skateboarders. But at some point this will have to be addressed, else where do these younger folks go – back on the streets? They can't quite end up in the children's play area, can they?

Perhaps they can debark to the paved playground alongside Westmount Park School? Could some innovative ways be devised to create a safe combination play area for the younger school kids that could also be rollerblade and skateboarder friendly in the off-school hours and on weekends? Steps and raised platforms, for instance, could double as impromptu seats, performance or play areas (skipping, hopscotch, shuffleboard, jacks, etc)? Now maybe that is something Stantec could research and propose to us since this is something we need to think about.

Another intergenerational play space for primary age, tweens and youths since physical activity for all those age groups is of ongoing importance. Proposing and doing this now with the refurbishment of the Westmount Park School already underway makes sense.

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Fulfilling seniors' requests for covered seating areas

Meanwhile, seniors have been asking for some covered or sheltered seating areas in the park, especially since we are told this worldwide pandemic will possibly be a recurring feature in our lives so we need to plan for that scenario.

One potential winter season solution would be perhaps to move the newly arrived 2020 'parklets' or [parking space seating platforms/curbside patios](#) designed by Cooperative Le Comité into the park for winter use and storage as they cannot stay in place curbside due to the necessity to clear the snow from the streets. Thus, if the combination ice rinks/splash pads become a reality, the proposed event area, currently the home of the temporary outdoor skating rink, could become a somewhat sheltered spot in winter for residents of all ages wishing to meet friends, and have a coffee and a (socially distanced, if needs be) chat in the park. These existing platforms might just fulfil that expressed need.



Parklet on Sherbrooke Street – Image: Coopérative Le Comité

Or, if for some reason that won't work, when the existing parklets need to be replaced, the future ones could potentially be designed for year-round usage on the streets in summer/fall and the park during winter months. After all, the proposed revitalization plan is supposed to take place over at least 5 to 7 or more years, although the exact length, or the cost, or indeed the elements of the plan have not yet been finalized.

Who aren't we hearing from?



What is missing in the current revitalization plan is feedback from those to whom the park is 'fine as it is' and who believe it only needs some care and maintenance. Meanwhile, those clamouring for wider, straighter paths are perhaps those who have not come to 'walk in the park' but to 'walk through the park' on their way to somewhere else. Council needs to hear from more park users, not park 'commuters'. So in addition, I propose current park users (or non-commuters) of all ages are surveyed. Maybe students can be hired to interview park users in different seasons and at different times of the day. Of course, that can only be done if the City delays making final plans until the pandemic is over.

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Make it an election issue

Nevertheless, delaying the implementation of the Westmount Park Revitalization Plan does not preclude on-going park maintenance work, replanting and researching some of the alternative options suggested here and elsewhere through conversations between citizens and their representatives on council. In fact, this should become a lively 2021 municipal election issue.

How can you voice your opinions?

[You can comment on the City website](#), and/or below this article, as well as by signing and/or commenting on the online [NatureScene: Support Nature in Westmount Park Now petition](#).

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