

UPHILL BATTLE TO SAVE A FARM

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

STE. ANNE DE BEAUPRÉ, QUE. – As agricultural lands go, the steep, weed-choked hill in front of Brigitte Robinet's old farmhouse would hardly be considered prime property.

But as her fight to stop the property from being rezoned enters a crucial phase, this may soon become ground zero in the much wider war to protect and preserve Quebec's finite farmland.

"People keep telling me, 'Brigitte, just shut up and let them rezone it and you can sell it for more money,'" Robinet said earlier this week at her young family's small 17-acre sheep farm on the edge of this small town, a 20-minute drive east of Quebec City.

"But we don't want to see it rezoned. We want to put it back into production like it used to, like it should be."

She wonders, however, if she'll ever get the chance.

A one-time apple orchard that faces south and offers a stunning view of the St. Lawrence River, Île d'Orléans and the town below, the six-acre hillside falls under a regional development plan that aims to rezone 166 hectares (approximately 400 acres) of mostly poor-quality farmland for residential use.

Developed by the regional municipal council (MRC) of the Côte de Beaupré and endorsed by the local branch of Quebec's powerful farmers' union – the Union des producteurs agricoles – the plan is considered an integral part of Bâtir 2031, a long-term urban development plan that is currently being drawn up by and for Quebec City and the surrounding region.

The MRC's plan was approved in May by the province's farmland protection watchdog, the Commission de la protection du territoire agricole.

Robinet, however, has appealed that ruling to the province's court of last resort, the Tribunal administratif du Québec.

She has also rallied a powerful provincial environmental lobby group to her cause. In June, the Quebec City chapter of the Regroupement national des conseils régionaux de l'environnement du Québec and the group's sister organization, Vivre en ville, applied for "interested observer" status in Robinet's

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case. Their involvement would bring financial and professional resources into Robinet's corner, as well as experience in making presentations and dealing with government and administrative processes.

That request is being challenged by the Côte de Beaupré MRC.

A hearing on the matter was held on Nov. 7. A decision could come anytime between now and February, when the tribunal is expected to hear Robinet's appeal.

The groups were part of the coalition of more than a dozen large farming and environmental organizations – including the UPA, the David Suzuki Foundation and Equiterre – that called for a five-year freeze on the rezoning of farmland at public hearings last month on Montreal's future development plans.

The coalition denounced Montreal's intention to build new roads, housing and businesses on existing farmland instead of developing of the 16,000-plus acres of non-agricultural lands that are already available on the island.

According to the president of Vivre en Ville (www.vivreenville.org), Quebec City and the Côte de Beaupré, which is part of the National Capital region, are taking the same wrong-headed approach to urban development as Montreal.

"The law requires that, in order to rezone farmland for residential or commercial use, there must not any be any other land available," said Alexandre Turgeon. "That is clearly not the case in either jurisdiction. Both have ample land available but they prefer to continue to expand rather than to increase the density of use of existing property."

The MRC of the Côte de Beaupré had originally wanted to rezone 364 hectares of farmland when it began



FRANCIS YACHON THE GAZETTE

Brigitte Robinet feeds Katahdin sheep at her farm in Ste. Anne de Beaupré. Robinet, who is fighting against a regional development plan that would see six acres of her land rezoned, says she has been pressured by local politicians and farmers to drop the case.

work on a 15-year regional development plan in 2009.

However, negotiations with local producers led to an agreement to rezone just 166 hectares, only five of which are being used for farming.

Most of the targeted properties are orphaned sections of lots that are earmarked for residential development by the half-dozen towns that make up the Côte de Beaupré, a narrow strip of fertile land that is sandwiched between the Laurentian Mountains and the St. Lawrence River and stretches east from the Montmorency Falls to the national wildlife reserve at Cap Tourmente.

Farming was the region's principal vocation until a half-century ago, when modern roads and key local tourist attractions like Ste. Anne's basilica and the Mont Ste. Anne ski resort stimulated local commercial and residential development.

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The mayor of Ste. Anne de Beaupré defended the regional MRC's rezoning request as being "essential" to the local economy.

"Towns need room to grow," said Jean-Luc Fortin, a retired high-school teacher. "If you don't grow, taxes go up."

He added that the regional consultation approach led to widespread consensus on which farming lands to rezone. And most of the 166 hectares up for rezoning are either gravel-strewn fields or rocky slopes that are simply useless for farming.

Fortin lumped Robinet's property into the latter category, saying the town plans to use it "sometime in the future" to run new water and sewer lines up to hilltop residents in the sector, which is locally famous for a few remaining farms and several high-end homes of wealthy retirees from the city.

"By rezoning part of her property we can get access to considerable grant money that could pay for 80 per cent or more of that infrastructure," said Fortin. "But if it remains farmland, we can't."

Fortin added he has told Robinet that, in exchange for dropping her appeal, the town will support her if she wants to apply to have the land rezoned back to agricultural use in the future. "It happens all the time (and) it only takes 10 minutes," Fortin said.

Other local farmers, he added, support the plan.

"It was a compromise," said Réjean Morency, a local cow-calf producer and president of the region's UPA chapter. "We tried to protect our best farmlands by sacrificing the worst property."

According to Morency – one of a handful of UPA-affiliated farmers

who attended several meetings with regional politicians to discuss the development plan – the deal is in the best long-term interests of farmers in the region.

"In the past we've had to fight rezoning requests on an individual basis almost non-stop," said Morency. "It takes a lot of time and energy to address them (and) we are volunteers. This approach was much better. We were consulted (and) the result will give us 15 years of breathing space."

But Robinet – who does not belong to the UPA but is a member of its rival, the upstart Union Paysanne – says she was never consulted and only learned about plans to rezone her property when she received a letter from the MRC two years ago announcing the plan.

"We were presented with a fait accompli," she said.

Since then, she and her family have fought the rezoning of their property at every turn.

Robinet in particular has proven to be a formidable opponent.

Born and raised on a family farm on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River, she moved here to raise her own family in 2000.

"We wanted to raise our kids in a country setting," said Robinet. "I know farming and my husband is an industrial mechanic so we make

"All these little green spaces you want to transform into bungalows are the lungs of the Côte de Beaupré."

OLIVIA ROBINET-PIGEON

a great team. And our kids love it."

In addition to successfully renovating the century-old home and barn, which is now home to four horses, two dogs and "a huge number" of cats, Robinet and her husband, Jean-Noel Mercier, both of whom have full-time jobs, grew small quantities of spices and medicinal herbs like Goldenseal.

"It was a family project," Robinet said over coffee in her cozy and comfortable home.

She added that her youngest daughter, Olivia, now 15, would deliver the herbs to a local farmer's market on her bicycle during the summer.

"It was fun but there wasn't any money in it," Robinet said.

So, the family considered restoring the hill to its former glory by putting a flock of geese there to eat the grass (and fatten them up for sale in the process), while they cleaned out dead apple trees and planted new

ones, plus pear and cherry trees.

Widespread fears over bird flu in 2007, which led to strict regulatory changes concerning goose production in Quebec, forced the couple to rethink their plan.

They decided to use Katahdin sheep, a low maintenance breed known for prodigious procreation.

Robinet bought three ewes and a ram from an Ontario producer in 2006. She now has a herd of 15 adults and 19 lambs.

The meat, fruit and herbs they hope to produce will be organic.

Robinet said the letter announcing the rezoning plan hit her family hard. "We were finally at the point where our herd was big enough to put in there when we got the news," she recalled.

Robinet said she, her husband and their two daughters attended two public hearings on the plan.

At the first one – a local hearing put on by the MRC – Olivia addressed the 50 or so people present.

"For sure if you change the zoning of our land to residential it would be profitable," she said in a two-page speech. "But it would only be in the short term."

"All these little green spaces you want to transform into bungalows are the lungs of the Côte de Beaupré. Stop putting your head in the sand and pushing environmental problems on to the next generation – which is me, and I don't want your project."

Robinet said everyone present applauded.

Despite Olivia's intervention and the objections of a handful of producers in the region, the plan was passed and submitted to the CPTAQ.

In approving the MRC's plan, the commission rejected Robinet's plan for development of the old orchard as "very weak" and "unrealistic."

For Robinet, who says she has been pressured by local politicians and farmers to drop her appeal, the decision added insult to injury.

"Our project is not only a good one, it is perfect for the hill, which faces south and is almost a microclimate," she said. "But it's a cultural thing, too. I can't believe that we have to fight so hard to keep using fields that our ancestors cleared by hand hundreds of years ago."

For Turgeon, the outcome of Robinet's appeal, which could fail for lack of funding and resources if his group is unsuccessful in its bid to be involved in the case, could have much broader consequences.

"If she wins, it basically torpedoed the MRC's plan and saves 166 hectares of farmland," he said. "If she loses, we will make a public appeal to government to reinforce the law to stop this incessant nibbling of one of our richest and non-renewable resources."

Protecting arable land: the stakes are high

Outgoing UPA president sounds alarm

Quebec's top farmer has a word of warning for all citizens in the province as he prepares to leave office: beware urban sprawl in Montreal.

"In the past decade alone, Quebec has lost nearly 7,500 acres (an area equal to 5,600 football fields) of usable farmland because of it," said Christian Lacasse, who will step down as president of the Union des producteurs du Québec on Thursday. "If we keep losing land at the rate we are, where will we be in 30 years?" he asked.

Lacasse had no comment on Brigitte Robinet's battle to save her hillside or on the UPA's position, saying he was not familiar with the issue.

According to Lacasse, a dairy producer in the Quebec City region, the protection of farmland should be a top priority "not only for farmers but for Quebec citizens from all walks of life."

"Only two per cent of Quebec's land mass is arable," said Lacasse, who has led the 60,000-member UPA for the past four years. "Compare that to 58 per cent in France and 45 per cent in the United States. We simply can't afford to waste the good land we have."

In addition to threatening the existence of the agri-food industry, which is the largest employer in Quebec, he said, failure to protect farmland will put the province's ability to feed itself in jeopardy. "There are now 7 billion people on Earth and the number is rising. The ability to produce food will soon become a critical need for countries around the world."

As well as nipping urban sprawl around Montreal and Quebec City, Lacasse said, brakes must be applied to large-scale initiatives that specifically target farmland – initiatives like the Mirabel airport project, the failed Rabaska project to build a deepwater terminal in Lévis and the extension of Highway 173 through the Beauce region.

"Farmers are not against development," said Lacasse. "But we must stop this reflex to constantly try and develop land that can be used to grow our food."

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