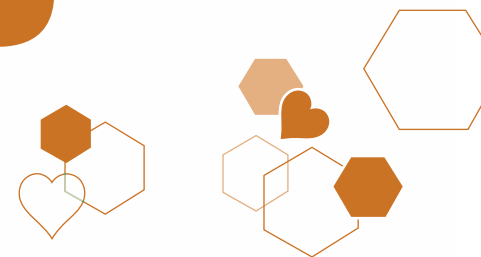


PICTURE: EVENTUS7



BY ANNIE BOUTET | PICTURES: EVENTUS7

Ecology Hits the Schoolyard!



Claude Gauthier and Hubert Chamberland, the minds behind the project.

Located on the shores of Richelieu River, Saint-Joseph-de-Richelieu elementary school was a perfect location for an ecological schoolyard. The project reflects the values of a community where water, air and environmental quality really matter.

At Saint-Joseph-de-Richelieu elementary school, parents and teachers hated to see their children not able to go outside for recess whenever it would rain, since the poorly drained schoolyard would turn into one huge mud puddle. Redoing the schoolyard with new playground modules and a renewable energy interpretive centre (centre d'interprétation des énergies renouvelables or CIER in French) would have been an ideal solution although very ambitious. The parents on the school board who originally came up with the idea were far from convinced it would ever actually happen.

Those parents, along with a number of community representatives, created the Fondation jeunesse de Richelieu, a Foundation that helped them achieve their goals by calling on the vital strengths of the local and business communities. Today, the school has its very own interpretive centre: a single building in the schoolyard that houses a wind turbine, geothermic system, weather station, solar captors and a huge organic farming greenhouse. "The spontaneous participation of Caisse de Richelieu-Saint-Mathias in the project created such a wonderful snowball effect," rejoices Diane Huot, Assistant General Manager at the caisse and member of the Board of Directors for the interpretive centre. "We started out with a muddy schoolyard and turned it into a wonderful place to be, all thanks to the great collaborative efforts of the community. This is an \$800,000 project with a contribution of \$55,000 from the caisse, not to mention the time and energy that was invested," she adds.

A TRULY GREEN SCHOOLYARD

"The centre offers a modern educational facility for students and teachers where they can learn about conservation and about renewable energies," continued Diane Huot. The playground section of the schoolyard was also renewed, and now includes new play modules and a soccer field. In addition to seeing the smiles on the faces of the students, the community is very happy to take advantage of the park's facilities after school hours. From the moment the first ground was broken in August 2007, up until the last touches were made on the green building with its rain water collectors, composting toilets and green roof system, time has shown that remarkable results can be achieved with a little elbow grease (provided in large part by local volunteers). Hubert Chamberland, architect, urban planner and forerunner of ecological

construction in Québec, designed the building, which is, of course, highly energy efficient, using sustainable materials, including a number of items produced in Québec.

A BRIDGE BETWEEN GENERATIONS

From the very start, the interpretive centre has been a great way to bridge the generation gap. "A horticultural program is now in place to enable young students to learn how to grow plants in the greenhouse. Some of the Richelieu seniors who were trained by the Saint-Hyacinthe Agro Food Technology Institute helped out with this program. The same group of seniors is taking turns maintaining the plants during school breaks," explains Diane Huot.

Throughout next summer, retired science teachers, horticulturists and water specialists will put their heads together and design educational programs. Caisse de Richelieu-Saint-Mathias offers two resources to the centre through its Desjardins Youth Work Experience summer job program.

Finally, as soon as the 2009 back-to-school period begins, the centre will be buzzing with teaching and extra-curricular activities, not to mention the presence of visitors and daily on-site animation. Children, parents and teachers will be able to experience a number of unique exploratory activities in this scientific laboratory. We hope that the project (which has now become a reality) will inspire other similar achievements and motivate young people to work in environmental disciplines. **D**

Already a prize winner

Even before the interpretive centre officially opened, Fondation jeunesse Richelieu received a Méritex from the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie du Bassin de Chambly. The award highlights the efforts of an organization that stands out through the excellence of its community projects and achievements. This recognition pays tribute to the tireless work and active motivation of the people in the community and the many partners who had faith in the project. **D**



VACHER CREEK

Big Scheme for a Little Stream

It's not easy to spot Vacher Creek in Google Earth's aerial photos. All you can see is a tiny winding strip, often artificially traced, that borders fields, crosses a few patches of forest and snakes behind the pools of houses in Saint-Jacques and Sainte-Marie-Salomé, in the Lanaudière region.

At ground level, however, this small watercourse and all the tiny tributaries it collects as it flows into the Assomption River are attracting a great deal of attention. Since 2005, an environmental management pilot project led by several partners is giving the entire Vacher Creek drainage basin back the clean water it once had.

This regional hydrographic network is one of the Assomption River's nine sub-basins, which flow into the St. Lawrence near Repentigny. With all its branches included, it spans just over 110 linear kilometres "that we walked from end to end to make observations, detect problems, take photos, georeference and transpose everything onto a map to give us an overall picture," explains Martin Thibault, Assistant Director of the Achigan-Montcalm Community Futures Development Corporation (CFDC).

The CFDC acts as an informal coordinator for the project, whose other two partners are the regional offices of the Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation (MAPAQ) and those of the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA). Municipalities and regional county municipalities are also contributing to the project, as well as various environmental groups, not to mention the participation of a good number of residents from Saint-Jacques and Sainte-Marie-Salomé. Caisse Desjardins de la Nouvelle-Acadie is sponsoring the project.

WANTED: POLLUTED WATERCOURSE

In 2004, when the three partner organizations decided to set up an environmental management program that could be exported to other regions, they needed to find a polluted watercourse that passed through agricultural, residential and industrial areas, where concrete redevelopment measures could provide measurable results. Vacher Creek fit the bill perfectly, especially since the Ministère du Développement durable de l'Environnement et des Parcs (MDDEP) had already been taking samples from it for five years to measure its phosphorus, nitrogen, turbidity and fecal coliform content.

Characterization of the entire drainage basin enabled the researchers to draw up an action plan for each of the three areas the creek passes through. According to Mr. Thibault, the threefold plan was probably the first of its kind in Québec. The interventions in each area were to take place between 2005 and 2010, but they first had to be approved and endorsed by the local organizations and municipalities involved, adapted to the available financing and accepted by the population.

The agricultural portion makes up the majority of the program, with around 75% of the efforts, such as renaturalizing plant life and reshaping banks, anti-erosion measures, reduced use of pesticides and fertilizers, guidance and support for farmers and so on. More than 95% of farmers have "come on board," so far, the CFDC's assistant director estimates. And approximately 70% of the banks have already been reshaped. "That's a really positive start!"

DEFECTIVE SYSTEMS

The results obtained to date for the residential areas are also extremely encouraging. The goal of this portion was to reduce pollution of the drainage basin caused by defective private sanitation systems. For the municipality of Saint-Jacques alone, that means 140 cesspools or septic tanks to replace. Several homeowners already changed their systems last summer, and when the municipality was informed about the project, it gave the other owners of faulty systems until 2012 to do the same. Similar efforts are now being made in Sainte-Marie-Salomé.

As for the industrial portion, the main target was an old landfill site in Sainte-Marie, with runoff reaching a Vacher Creek tributary. Thanks to measures taken by the MDDEP, the runoff is now harnessed and treated. In addition, the region's small industries have also been informed about the problem of discharging residual waste directly into the watercourse (oils, waste water, etc.) and a regional waste drop-off centre should open shortly to ensure that residential, commercial and industrial garbage is collected on a weekly basis.

The project also includes a communications portion to promote the initiative to the population. Information has been circulating on posters and in flyers, brochures, *Le Vacher* newspaper, letters to the residents affected and signs on the properties of participating residents. "Everyone in the area has heard about our project," says Martin Thibault, "starting with the participating farmers and the hundreds of owners with faulty sanitary systems who were affected this past year."

CAISSE CONTRIBUTION

Caisse Desjardins de la Nouvelle-Acadie played a key role in awareness-raising by covering the project's communications expenses. Its greatest contribution, however, was towards the construction work on the banks in the agricultural area, as well as the replacement of sanitary systems. In all, the Caisse injected \$200,000 into the Vacher Creek project through its Community Development Fund.

"We often work with the CFDC," explains Yves Gaudet, General Manager. "When they first presented the project to us, they were very well prepared and we could see that this project would be highly beneficial for the region. Environmental problems often build up over a matter of decades. We need to act now to repair the damage right away and make sure the problems aren't passed onto future generations."

It will take a few more years of sampling the Creek's water to determine whether the project has achieved the desired results. But it's a safe bet that before long, its 110 km of banks will once more be a pleasant place to walk! **D**

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SAINT-ADELPHE

The Local Coop gets Organized



The devitalization of villages in rural environments remains a worrisome reality. But, rather than looking on helplessly while their businesses disappear and population dwindles, the residents of Saint-Adelphé have banded together in solidarity to protect their community.

Spread along the shores of the Bastican River, Saint-Adelphé is located in the regional county municipality (RMC) of Mékinac, some 65 km east of Trois-Rivières. Despite the village's charm, its 1,000 residents saw the growing signs of devitalization as, one by one, most of the shops and businesses along the main street closed down. Video club, hardware store, butcher... all fell victim to an economic system that encouraged the big guys to swallow up the little guys without any concern for the surrounding communities. People were having to travel up to 20 km to rent a movie or buy a box of screws. That's quite a trip!

A STRUCTURING PROJECT

An economic mini-summit held in 2005 gave residents, merchants and politicians the opportunity to share ideas on how to put the brakes on their village's continuing decline. It was during those discussions that the idea of a cooperative was introduced, an approach that François Douville, now chairman of Saint-Adelphé's Coop de solidarité, couldn't wait to implement.

"In my opinion, we had to create a synergy. During a trip to the îles de la Madeleine, I had seen a multiservice cooperative that included a gas station, a grocery store and a hardware store. I thought that such an approach could work for our rural municipalities."

Following the mini-summit, a committee was formed to decide how to implement the planned project; the consensus was that a solidarity cooperative would provide the best framework to engage the local community. Their concept went one step further: it aimed to establish a partnership between Saint-Adelphé's solidarity coop and CoopPlus, an agricultural cooperative already operating three hardware stores and a grocery store in the area. In this partnership, the solidarity cooperative would buy the land and build the facilities, for which CoopPlus, as operator, would sign a 20-year lease agreement.

However, to take those plans from the drawing board to reality, several partners were needed. Through the efforts of the solidarity coop, better known as the Coop du coin, a financing package was put together by obtaining subsidies from the regional, provincial and federal governments as well as contributions from local stakeholders, in particular Caisse de Saint-Thècle-Saint-Adelphé, which provided \$60,000.

At the same time, the caisse and Coop du coin administrators, led

by François Douville, pulled off an extraordinary feat by selling life membership cards costing \$250 each to three quarters of the village's families, thus acquiring 305 members.

The only cloud on the horizon: the building's location, a problem that caused friction; some members wanted to have the Coop du coin right on the main street, while others preferred a more strategic site to maximize sales potential. "After discussions, we opted for a spot at the town's entrance, a high traffic hub that lies at the junctions of Route 352 and a road that leads to Portneuf County," explains Douville.

A MODEL WORTH REPLICATING

Built at a cost of \$1.1 million and opened in June 2008, the new multiservice centre boasts a grocery store with butcher shop, an SAQ counter, a hardware store, a self-service gas station and a video rental outlet, all under one roof. Such synergy helps achieve greater profitability since each business benefits from the other's customer traffic, and fixed costs and manpower are shared.

One year later, the Coop du coin is running at full throttle, surpassing even the planning committee's expectations, to the extent that city retailers would be green with envy. Of course, having 300 loyal members has helped immensely. Another accomplishment: the Coop du coin has created a dozen jobs. "In a town of only 1,000 residents, that's significant! If we were to implement the same concept in a city the size of Trois-Rivières or Montréal, we would be looking at sizeable economic benefits," notes Douville. Moreover, the achievement has ignited a surge of optimism among the town's inhabitants, who are now more inclined to approve other projects.

Needless to say, without neighbourhood stores, it becomes difficult to keep or attract people—especially young families—in smaller communities. Inexorably, the population reaches a standstill and begins to fall, dragging down schools and other establishments. For this reason, a social and community-based economic model such as the Coop du coin represents a promising solution for struggling rural villages. It also reflects a measure of the community's own sense of creativity and control. Furthermore, Desjardins' contribution is a superb example of intercooperation that François Douville hopes to see replicated many times over, throughout Québec. **D**