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A failure on almost all accounts

March, 2006 - Henry Aubin

Description:
A failure on almost all counts: The municipal mergers mean more spending and more bureaucrats, but diminished services
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The public outcry over declining services - including snow removal and pothole repair - has been rising since the 2002 merger of Montreal Island.

This winter's wave of indignation raises a question: What do Montrealers have to show for the merger as a whole?

Let's compare the promised benefits of the merger with the actual results.

We'll look at changes during the four-year period beginning Jan. 1, 2002, when the Parti Quebecois government's amalgamation came into force, and Dec.31, 2005, the eve of the partial demerger.

Spending. The government said the operating costs of local government across the island would fall. Indeed, a 1999 study by SECOR Consulting Inc. for Montreal's pro-merger Bourque administration predicted a drop in spending of seven per cent.

Reality: According to the Montreal transition committee's recent report, operating expenses during the four years increased by 16.3 per cent.

Meanwhile, inflation in Montreal during that period was just 6.7 per cent.

The Quebec government's operating budget during this period went up by just 8.6 per cent. The megacity has, thus, spent at almost twice the rate as the province.

Labour. The much-touted SECOR study said the merger would cut the duplication of jobs in different municipalities and so reduce the need to replace retiring workers. It predicted the workforce would shrink by 1,260 people after five years.

Reality: Official figures show that during the four years, 330 more people (as measured in person years) work for the city. This includes at least 90 contract workers.

A breakdown by job category is revealing. Employees who serve the public directly - namely, blue-collars, police, firefighters and crossing guards - have declined by two per cent. Yet managers and supervisors have increased by nine per cent.

Taxes. The Bouchard government said most Montrealers would see lower taxes.

Reality: Taxes from all sources (mostly on property and water) have risen by 12.5 per cent, almost double the inflation rate.

Global competitiveness. One of Quebec's chief arguments for the merger was that a unified municipal apparatus would spur investments here.

Reality: According to Montreal International, the body that since 1999 has represented all the metropolitan region's municipalities in the hunt for investors, the island's unity has not been a factor in a single investment in the last four years.

As MI's president, Marc Fortier, told me, "For investors, it's not important whether there are 12, 25 or 50 municipalities so long as the whole region speaks with one voice" - that is, through an umbrella agency such as MI.

Social equity. The PQ government said the merger would enable well-off parts of Montreal Island to contribute more to disadvantaged areas.

This idea has had some bright spots. Montreal Nord Mayor Marcel Parent, for example, attributes $5 million of his long-deprived borough's new $37-million budget to the megacity's equalization policy.

But there's a flip side. Some boroughs - including Cote des Neiges/Notre Dame de Grace and the Plateau - say the system shortchanges them and that it needs changes.

Reality: It's far too early to assess the system's value.

Bear in mind that municipal mergers were not required to spread the wealth.

The old Montreal Urban Community provided a formula for richer municipalities to help poor ones. If inadequate, that system could have been recalibrated.

Environment. The Tremblay administration attributes several successes to the merger. One is a bylaw on pesticides across the island. Another measure safeguards "eco-territories" from development.

Reality: Each innovation could have been achieved without the merger. Quebec could have enacted a province-wide pesticide law (as, indeed, it did later).

And the regional body, the Communaute metropolitaine de Montreal, can protect green space. The MUC could have done this also.

Elected officials. The Parti Quebecois said the ending of 28 suburbs' mayors, support staffs and councillors would yield big savings.

Reality: The year before the merger, the salaries and benefits of elected officials across the island cost $7.9 million. In 2005, they were $8.7 million.

If you include political staff at both city hall and in the boroughs, the new cost is even greater. The number of these aides is growing like mad. Salaries go as high as $95,000.

All in all, then, the merger has failed on virtually every count for four years. Deterioration of snow removal and other services - which the PQ said would improve - is a metaphor for the new system as a whole.

Indeed, defenders of the merger at city hall are hard-pressed to name one major achievement that could not have been realized without a merger. Even the ambitious overhaul of the water network could have been done under a strengthened MUC. (Just ask ex-MUC-boss Vera Danyluk.)

I don't blame the Tremblay administration for most of the dismal record: The mayor's team is of above-average competence on day-to-day matters. Rather, I blame the structure: It's inherently unmanageable and lacks a reason for being.

This record raises questions.

First, why are Premier Jean Charest, Municipal Affairs Minister Nathalie Normandeau and Tremblay so keen on punishing those suburbs that, via referendums, opted out of this nonsense?

And, more important, why is Charest in particular so dead set on maintaining the system that is producing higher costs, a declining quality of life and (as last fall's record-low voter turnout of 35 per cent shows) public disaffection? Not once has he justified his position.

That silence is telling. It suggests just how intellectually untenable this whole improvised adventure has become.

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