



Position Paper

The Pontiac's Place on the Economic Landscape of the Outaouais

Presented to the minister of *Affaires municipales et de l'Occupation du territoire*,
Mr. Martin Coiteux, during his consultation tour on the
Fonds d'appui au rayonnement des régions (FARR).

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The future of the MRC Pontiac is linked with that of the Outaouais. Beyond an area that aims to make sustainable use of its resources, the Pontiac is first and foremost an occupied territory that ranks 102nd out of 104 MRCs according to Quebec's Economic Health Index. Since a region is strong when its weakest links are strong, the elected officials of the Outaouais have an interest in sharing a vision of development that will have a positive social and economic impact throughout the region.

The Future of the Pontiac is Linked with that of the Outaouais

We welcome the Quebec government's intention to recognize municipalities as local governments and the decentralization, simplification, and reduction of administrative procedures at the municipal level.

We also appreciate the minister's willingness to recognize the specific characteristics of the regions and we hope this will allow for a greater flexibility in the next *Strategy to Ensure the Occupancy and Vitality of Territories*.

Finally, we wish to express our profound conviction that the future of the Pontiac is closely linked to that of all the Outaouais and western Quebec. However, this is also a cause for concern for us: depending on how regional consultation and the prioritization of projects are organized, the impacts may be very different and this can have a crucial effect on the future of our Pontiac communities.

Portrait of the MRC Pontiac¹

The MRC Pontiac covers an area 12 826 km². The population numbers 13 988, with a median employment income of \$32 556.

The Pontiac has numerous assets:

- Agricultural land priced lower than the Quebec average;
- A large area with a network of roads and trails for outdoor activities and sport tourism;
- A rich cultural and built heritage coupled with a splendid natural environment that is the pride of residents and cottagers alike;
- Proximity to urban centres;
- Proximity to Ontario;
- Bilingualism

¹ Source: *Panorama des régions du Québec*. Institut de la statistique du Québec. 2016

The Pontiac Contributes to the Development of the Outaouais through Sustainable Resource Projects

A number of projects in the Pontiac, such as the Biomass Conversion Centre (CVB), have attracted interest from outside the region. There is also the project for a provincial park on the Dumoine River and success stories in agriculture such as the hops cooperative and the Land Link project.

The roads that serve forestry operations, the tourism industry and outfitters are essential assets. The potential for mining palladium and other metals on Calumet Island is also being evaluated.

A result of sound vision and a credible and innovative approach, these projects, particularly the CVB, are also in line with the energy policy of the Quebec government and are a good fit with global trends, including those of environmental sustainability.

Through hard but efficient work, these efforts of the Pontiac will have a positive impact for the whole of the Outaouais.

The Communities of the Pontiac Need Help to Survive

The Pontiac is not just a region that wants to develop its natural resources. It is, first of all, communities where people **live**.

Eighteen communities risk running out of time well before they can benefit from sustainable resource development projects. The last forestry crisis had a devastating effect on Pontiac communities, which continue to get poorer. Services are disappearing slowly but surely.

The MRC Pontiac has been in decline for a number of years now, marked by a significant negative growth rate.

- Substantial population loss: natural growth rate of -8.4% between 2011 and 2015
- Out-migration of youth due to the lack of a post-secondary school and skilled employment opportunities;
- Out-migration of senior citizens and retirees due to lack of local facilities and services to meet their needs;
- Lack of access to high speed internet and cell phone services;
- Workers obliged to travel: given the lack of jobs in the area, a significant portion of the workforce commutes to:
 - Gatineau-Ottawa, Pembroke (Ontario): workers commute daily;
 - Montréal: weekly commuting
 - Northern Quebec and Western Canada: travel away for work periods varying from two weeks to a month
- Difficulty in keeping qualified workers due to lack of employment opportunities;
- Loss of local services (and, consequently, skilled jobs): health sector, etc.

A Clear Message: the Outaouais is Strong if its Weakest Links are Strong

At first glance, the Outaouais, taken as a whole, appears to be one of the most dynamic regions of Quebec. Gatineau is a central hub, comparing well to its larger neighbour, Ottawa, the capital of Canada, as shown by the new economic vitality index (EVI). Gatineau and the neighbouring MRC des Collines-de-l'Outaouais, the most urban of all Outaouais MRCs, are classed respectively 12th and 4th in Quebec out of 104 regional municipalities.

One might be tempted to think that the success of the urban centre is reflected in the more rural periphery. This is not the case. The composite economic vitality index (EVI) classes the MRC Pontiac 102nd out of 104 MRCs, at -13.26472, just ahead of the MRC Rocher-Percé (-16.93082) and Haute-Gaspésie (-17.88920)². Fifteen of the eighteen Pontiac municipalities are devitalized, according to the EVI.

There is a sharp divide between the rural and the urban in the Outaouais, a split more pronounced than elsewhere in Quebec, contradicting the often-heard statement that the rural areas on the periphery always benefit from a strong urban centre.

When a bank closes its branches in the Pontiac to concentrate activities in Gatineau, when a regional health network moves its resources to Gatineau, does the Outaouais lose out? No. Indeed, such concentration of resources probably improves the situation by increasing efficiency.

Does the population of the Pontiac lose out? Unfortunately, yes. A lot! How can elected officials and other stakeholders, who constantly struggle to improve the quality of life in our communities, attract new businesses and young families to the area? Moreover: how can we keep them here when local services are disappearing one after the other?

² MAMOT, Indice de vitalité économique 2014. <http://www.mamrot.gouv.qc.ca/developpement-territorial/indices-connaissances-et-outils/indices/indice-de-vitalite-economique/>

Such imbalances perpetuate themselves because no one is comparing the regional benefit to the cost of devitalizing certain areas. And doubts arise in the minds of regional stakeholders: will other local services like our elementary and secondary schools be the next to go? An area, just like a business, cannot develop in a climate of **uncertainty**.

A simple change of perspective allows us to understand the impact of a decision that is all too often brushed off with "it is only one job that is lost": a job lost in the Pontiac equals 20 lost in Gatineau.

The MRC Pontiac believes that regional consultation and cooperation are necessary. But the MRC Pontiac proposes a reversal in the way of looking at things. Measuring the strength of a region on the strength of its urban centre implies that benefits are spread throughout, which is not the case in the Outaouais. Rather, it is by strengthening its weakest links that a region becomes stronger. The Pontiac is the weakest link in the Outaouais.

The Outaouais region must support and strengthen its most devitalized areas, such as the Pontiac, in the hope of reducing the exceptionally large gap (according to the EVI) in economic conditions.

MRC Pontiac Recommendations

1. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FARR: UNKNOWNNS THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED

1.1 FARR management assigned to the MRCs

Since the disappearance of the Conférences régionales des élus (CRÉ), there is no accountable regional body. Therefore, we propose that the management of the *Fonds d'appui au rayonnement des régions* (FARR) be given to the Outaouais Table of Wardens. This proposition is in line with the government of Quebec's intentions to consider municipalities as true partners and local governments in their own right.

1.2 Regional Economic Vitality Indicator (EVI) made known to Elected Officials

Thirty percent (30%) of the funding that the Outaouais will receive from FARR is determined by the EVI. However, regional EVIs have not been released to date so we cannot estimate how the amount of funding attributed to the region has been calculated. This lack of information also prevents us from assessing the position of the Outaouais region on a comparative basis. The regional EVIs must be made known to the elected officials of the Outaouais.

Let us also remember that the total amount of funding, \$30M, is small in comparison to the sums allotted to the CRÉs before their abolition in 2014.

2. THE FIRST REGIONAL PROJECT: DEVELOP A REGIONAL VISION AND ACTION PLAN

Before putting out a call for projects and prioritizing them, the MRC Pontiac believes that Outaouais elected officials must consult with each other in order to develop a common vision. This process would, by necessity, be extended to civil society as well.

However, the MRC Pontiac cautions the minister against the multiplication and hastiness of consultations with civil society partners. The MRC Pontiac has already

scheduled two consultations with stakeholders for the spring of 2017 (*Cap sur l'Ouest* and review of the strategic plan *Vision Pontiac 2020*). Coordination is required and must be ensured by the wardens of the MRCs and Gatineau's mayor.

The development of a common regional vision that all partners can be comfortable with takes time. Adherence cannot be forced but must occur naturally. Rushing the process would give the impression that issues have been resolved before even being discussed and raise doubts among those representing the most devitalized areas as to the benefits of the process.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the Strategy to Ensure the Occupancy and Vitality of Territories, elected officials must take the time necessary to define a regional vision and develop an action plan that would, ideally, be aligned with those of their own territories.

3. FARR FUNDING: A CALCULATION OF THE IMPACT ON THE DEVITALIZED TERRITORIES MUST BE PART OF EVERY PROJECT

Each request for funding from FARR should include as precise a calculation as possible of the benefits for the region's devitalized areas.

This is not about imposing choices. What we are suggesting affects the process rather than the results. When regional priorities are being identified and projects prioritized, whatever decisions are made, let us develop the reflex of always considering the impact of regional projects on the most devitalized MRCs. By doing this we will be able to explain how this or that priority contributes, or does not contribute, to the development of devitalized MRCs.

We believe that this would be a productive and positive approach, not overly demanding yet encouraging a new perspective that has otherwise been overlooked by decision-makers. Even with the best of intentions, the needs of the most disadvantaged often pass under decision-makers' radar.

4. ENCOURAGE ALL INITIATIVES FROM TERRITORIES WANTING TO WORK TOGETHER

The minister must encourage and finance all initiatives to bring together elected officials from different areas for the purpose of developing common action plans.

Clustering of territories for the purposes of development planning should happen naturally, based on common interests or other affinities. Even if such clusters don't correspond precisely to the administrative boundaries of a region, they still have the advantage of:

- Reinforcing the habit of regional collaboration;
- Aligning local development plans, making them more efficient;
- Balancing the power among the most and the least vitalized territories within an administrative region, allowing those devitalized to more strongly present their interests at the regional level.

On this last point, the MRC Pontiac can give an example. In the summer of 2016, we initiated a process of reflection with two other MRCs: La Vallée-de-la-Gatineau and Témiscamingue.

This process resulted in *Cap sur l'Ouest* whose objective is to measure the economic potential of the three MRCs and work jointly on a process to create a socio-economic development strategy. This strategy would form the base of a shared action plan for the development of energy potential and natural resources.

We believe that the MRC Pontiac has already benefited from this process as it contributed to the regional support we received when requesting major investment to improve the Bois-Franc Road to connect it with the proposed route linking Maniwaki and Témiscamingue. The discussions with our *Cap sur l'Ouest* partners allowed us to clearly explain the benefits from a regional angle that could be understood by all Outaouais stakeholders.

5. A STRUCTURAL MEASURE RECOGNIZING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OUTAOUAIS

The MAMOT must sit down with Outaouais elected officials to discuss putting in place a structural measure comparable to the Plan Nord or the Stratégie maritime but adapted to the Outaouais.

The region shares a long border with Ontario and has a high level of bilingualism. The proximity to a market of 10M people is an obvious opportunity, but the border is also an obstacle and a threat that exacerbates the development gaps between the territories of the region.

This structural measure would allow, for example:

- Farmers to sell their produce in both provinces (permit harmonization)
- Harmonization of sales taxes with those of Ontario
- Freer trade between the two provinces
- Promotion of tourism on both sides of the river (shared tourist routes, harmonization of snowmobile permits, etc.)
- Harmonization of the cost of wood fibre to allow for the establishment of the Pontiac Biomass Conversion Centre (CVB) in Quebec
- Improved mobility of skilled labour

This measure could also include the Laurentides and Abitibi-Témiscamingue regions.

Conclusion

The MRC Pontiac is convinced that its future is closely linked to that of the Outaouais region. Regional consultation, dialogue and identification of priorities must remain under the leadership of the elected officials of the Outaouais. The wardens must have the ear of the government and, in particular, that of the MAMOT.

The MRC Pontiac's most important contribution to the Outaouais is sustainable development in the forest and agriculture sectors as well as in mining and tourism. We believe we are accomplishing this despite the economic crisis whose effects are still felt after 10 years. The value of projects such as the Biomass Conversion Centre (CVB) is recognized beyond the borders of the Outaouais. That said, even though these projects are credible and innovative, they still require a number of years of work before realization.

However, the MRC Pontiac is not just a resource MRC that wants to sustainably develop its resources. The Pontiac is, first and foremost, an inhabited territory, a place to live. There are 18 communities experiencing worsening conditions. The MRC Pontiac, 102nd out of 104 according to the Economic Vitality Index, needs the support of the region to revitalize those communities that are in decline.

Pontiac elected officials are convinced that a region like the Outaouais is stronger when its weakest links are strengthened. The Outaouais must express this message clearly and concretely in the *Strategy to Ensure the Occupation and Vitality of Territories*. In this regard, regional projects that first measure their impact on the most devitalized areas must be given priority.