

Chassidim dismiss complaints against them at hearings

By JANICE ARNOLD, Staff Reporter

MONTREAL — Chassidim in Outremont dismissed a lengthy account of the community's alleged longstanding violations of municipal bylaws and regulations given before the Bouchard-Taylor commission last week as just another chapter in a history of complaints against them by one individual.

Alex Werzberger, head of the Coalition of Outremont Chassidic Organizations, said there is no truth to Pierre Lacerte's charges, adding that relations between the chassidim and other Outremont residents are calm these days compared to years past.

"He has some kind of fixation on the chassidic community and has been going to the [borough] council for about three years now," he said.

Lacerte, who lives on Hutchison Street in the heart of the chassidic neighbourhood, presented the commission with a petition said to be signed by 158 of the borough's residents, as well as an 80-page brief with photos and documentation, that he said backs up his assertions.

He said the chassidim are "powerful, stubborn and pugnacious," and are receiving "special privileges" from the borough's elected officials. The administration and police, he charged, are turning a blind eye to infractions by chassidim, or cancelling notices.

The situation is creating social tensions, he suggested.

Among the issues he raised are synagogues and schools built in residential zones, violations of parking regulations, intercity buses operating on residential streets, excessive noise, garbage rules not respected, and deterioration of properties.

Politicians find it to their advantage to let the chassidim flout the law, because their rabbis tell them how to vote, he added.

"We have permits for everything we build," Werzberger countered. "All of the issues involving synagogues and schools were resolved years ago. No one is getting any special privileges."

Since 2000, he said, parking regulations have been waived on Jewish holidays in an area of about two or three streets. On Christian holidays, he added, the regulations are suspended in the whole of the borough.

“We have very good relations with the rest of the community. The old frictions have died out. There are no fights,” Werzberger said.

Lacerte, who has lived in Outremont since 1985, also alleged that people who complain about the chassidim have been threatened, harassed or sometimes been the victims of vandalism. For that reason, he asked that the names of the petition’s signatories not be made public.

But Werzberger said that Lacerte didn’t want to reveal the names on the petition because “people may have changed their minds or they don’t even exist.” Commission co-chair Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor heard out Lacerte, and Bouchard commented that his assertions appeared to be well substantiated. However, he said such matters are not within the commission’s purview and advised Lacerte to go back to municipal authorities.

Lacerte received some support from opposition Vision Montreal mayoral candidate Christine Hernandez, who is running in a Dec. 16 by-election in the borough. In a press release, she said that the problem lies in the “special treatment” outgoing mayor Stéphane Harbour’s administration has accorded the chassidic community, and this is straining inter-community relations. Harbour resigned in October over allegations of improper spending of municipal funds. Hernandez alleged that the current administration has negotiated arrangements with the chassidim “behind closed doors, leading to speculation and without taking into account the effect of these agreements on other parties involved.” Hernandez said there is concern that taxpayers will have to foot the bill for another court battle if problems continue to escalate, referring to legal battles in recent years that upheld the rights to install an eruv and to install sukkot on condo balconies.

Lacerte is being sued for defamation by **Michael Rosenberg**, a prominent chassidic real estate developer and member of Outremont’s intercultural relations committee. Lacerte had demanded that Rosenberg be removed from the committee, alleging that he has violated municipal regulations over the years. The chassidic community decided not to appear at the Bouchard-Taylor public hearings, but Werzberger said he did meet privately with the two commissioners. “I think we had a better exchange that way. On stage, there is no dialogue, it’s just talk.”

He described the meeting as “very frank” and said he felt “well received.” The commissioners asked, among other things, about kashrut supervision. “Taylor asked if it was true that the Jewish community is forcing food companies to change their formulas and therefore raising prices,” Werzberger said.

“I said to him, ‘No one is forcing anyone, it’s the other way around. The companies are coming to the rabbis to obtain kosher certification. Coke and Pepsi are kosher in Montreal – do you think the Jewish community could force companies that size to do anything?’”

Victor Goldbloom, chair of Canadian Jewish Congress, Quebec region, said he finds it unfortunate that Lacerte and other people are trying to make a political issue out of relations between the chassidim and the community at large.

Periodic “misunderstanding and tensions” have arisen over many years, he said, but to his knowledge the situation in Outremont has not worsened. “People know the chassidim have their way of life and express their religion in an intense way.” What does concern Goldbloom is that the commissioners did not intervene in Lacerte’s presentation when it veered off the commission’s mandate. “The commissioners have recently been cutting short people who have had unpleasant or derogatory things to say. I would have hoped they would have said this was unacceptable and inappropriate.”

Goldbloom also hopes that when Bouchard and Taylor write their report they do not simply recount what they have heard, but make a strong recommendation for a political “leadership that stands up for the positive things in Quebec society,” which, according to Goldbloom, far outweigh the negatives.

The commission is to give its report to Premier Jean Charest on March 31. Goldbloom will be making CJC’s presentation at the commission hearings next week.

In an e-mailed open letter, Federation CJA president Marc Gold addressed the issue of when and if the Jewish community should comment on what is said at the public consultations.

“Some have questioned why we in the Jewish community have not been more present in the debate up to now. This is a fair question, and one that does not admit of an easy answer,” he wrote.

“In short, we have decided not to respond publicly to every comment made during the course of the hearings, believing that it would not serve the best interests of the community.

“While reasonable people may disagree with this approach, we have been engaged in other ways, and ones which I do believe will serve us well in the long run.”