

# Soulanges Canal

Last week's event also served notice that AGAS and the Regie's members will be pressuring federal Public Works Minister Michael Fortier to deliver on a year-old promise to help move the file forward. Vaudreuil-Soulanges MRC prefect Normand Ménard reminded Fortier he had made a commitment to help reopen the canal at a meet-the-candidate event in St. Lazare last year.

"He can't remain passive if he wants to be elected in the region," Ménard said pointedly.

Politically, the project is a touchy one for Fortier, who has staked his political future on being elected in Vaudreuil-Soulanges; AGAS is well aware of that, which was one of the reasons for their timing of last week's press conference amid speculation of an imminent federal election.

Opened in 1897, the 23-kilometre canal connects Lake St. Francis with Lac St. Louis via five locks and five control structures which created a controlling depth of 14 feet.

As a result, lakers had to transship their cargoes to the smaller canallers for the trip between Prescott and Montreal Harbour.

That changed with the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1960, allowing seagoing vessels with drafts up to 28 feet to access the Great Lakes. The Soulanges Canal was closed to shipping in 1959 and allowed to deteriorate. The cut stone walls remain relatively true, but the locks and control structures were allowed to deteriorate after the federal government signed the entire canal and its infrastructure over to the province.

While the turn-of-the-century heritage structures that once housed the canal's infrastructure still exist, most have been recycled into private residences or, in the case of the Cascades compound, a popular summer theatre and campground.

In 1993, AGAS began the campaign to re-

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open the canal to serve the growing recreational-boating industry. They knew pleasure boaters loathed the Melocheville and Beauharnois locks and the two lift bridges on the Beauharnois Ship Channel. Small craft were forced to wait four hours or longer at Seaway locks as paying shipping got priority.

That plus several well-reported small-boat tragedies in the Seaway locks, convinced backers of the feasibility of reopening the canal and lining its bucolic banks with residential development and marine-related busi-

nesses.

But the cost of reopening the old canal was a major deterrent for successive Parti Québécois and Liberal governments. For one thing, nobody could predict exactly how much the job would cost. The Lachine Canal, which was built at roughly the same time and served the same shipping, was reopened in 2004 at a cost of close to \$300 million, nearly double what was originally projected.

As with the Lachine Canal, a large part of the cost of reopening the Soulanges Canal lies in having to remove, restore or rebuild the seven highway bridges and one railway trestle crossing the canal. To offer a viable alternative to the Seaway, the canal has to offer a minimum clearance for sailboats as well as powerboats, so spans will have to be either lift bridges or pivoting structures.