

# The Evolution of the Montreal Metro

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Public transit in Montreal has undergone a tremendous transformation since the early 20th century, with the metro system being central and emblematic. The evolution of the metro has been far from linear, and the decisions that were made often spoke volumes about the city's priorities and self-perception. This is the history of the Montreal metro, how it arrived at its present state, and what its future holds.



## Early transit in Montreal and the first metro proposal

1910

At the beginning of the 20th century, public transportation in Montreal was dominated by an extensive network of streetcars that served the growing population in the city center. As the population grew street congestion did as well, leading to major streetcar punctuality issues. The initial consideration of underground transportation arose from the desire for a public transit system that could operate in spite of the heavy traffic on the streets (Clairoux, 2001).

The Montreal Street Railway Company, which was in charge of the tramway system, began to study the possibility of a metro system in Montreal in 1910. At this time, other major European and North American cities were in the process of establishing their own metro systems, making it logical for Montreal to follow suit given its rapidly growing economy and population (Société de transport de Montréal, n.d.). An underground system could be both a solution to the issue of overcrowded streets and an opportunity for Montreal to modernize in pace with other major cities.

The initial proposal for underground transit was made in 1910, consisting of a single line running mainly along Parc Avenue/de Bleury Street (Dufour, n.d.-a). These tunnels were meant for circulating streetcars underground as opposed to serving as a bonafide metro plan (Société de transport de Montréal, n.d.). Despite this proposal and several others being put forward in the following years, nothing materialized in the early 20th century. The first world war, followed by the Great Depression, prevented the approval and granting of funding to any metro projects, as the city was plunged into economic crisis, and street crowding was vastly reduced, alleviating the traffic issues necessitating underground transit (Gilbert, 2021).

## World war II and beyond: Reignited demands for a metro

1944-1953

Ramifications from the Second World War in Montreal increased crowding in trams once again, in part due to the rationing of gasoline, reigniting the calls for underground transit (Scott, 2016). These calls were amplified by a metro proposal made by the Montreal Tramways Company in 1944, which consisted of one line running under Sainte-Catherine Street and another under Saint-Denis Street, Notre-Dame Street, and Saint-Jacques Street (Société de transport de Montréal, n.d.).

Although this proposal never came to fruition, during and after the war, it was becoming clear that a metro was necessary, as car use was rapidly increasing to the detriment of public transit use, worsening the city's chronic traffic issues. It was also argued that a metro was essential in maintaining Montreal's status as a major Canadian city, as Toronto was a rapidly rising metropolis that had begun developing its own subway system (Gilbert, 2021).

In 1953, the Montreal Transportation Commission, a newly formed organization with the primary goal of replacing the streetcar network with a new bus network, proposed another variation of the metro, building upon the 1944 plan (Société de Transport de Montréal, 2004). However, this plan and all others made at this time failed to make it past the planning stage.

## Thinking big: the Jean Drapeau administration and a renewal of interest in the metro

1954-1960

The push Montreal needed in order to finally commit to a metro system arrived with the election of the Jean Drapeau administration. Drapeau was the mayor of Montreal from 1954 to 1957 and from 1960 to 1986, with a tenure distinguished by its ambition and major focus on transforming Montreal into a larger, more modern, and more prestigious city. This was largely spurred by the growth of Toronto in the early 1960s as it began to overtake Montreal as Canada's economic capital (Radio-Canada, 2021). Drapeau spearheaded several iconic projects in the city, the metro among them, with the goal of placing Montreal on the world stage.





Portrait of Jean Drapeau. Credit: Harry Palmer

Initially, Drapeau was opposed to the construction of a metro, sharing the same belief as many politicians at the time that it was the age of the automobile. However, this perception changed with a visit to Paris in 1960. The Paris metro made use of a recent technological innovation, rubber tires, which were quieter and allowed for faster acceleration (Magder, 2018). Given that all other North American metro systems were using steel tires on rails, inspiration struck: a metro with rubber tires could be the perfect way to signal Montreal's innovation and progress to the world (Gilbert, 2021).

## Breaking ground

1961-1962

With Drapeau's approval, the Quebec government granted Montreal the right to construct the metro. Drapeau proposed the first route for the Montreal metro later that year consisting of three lines: orange (line 1), green (line 2), and red (line 3). The orange line was to run north-south along Berri Street, and the green line was to run east-west across the downtown core. The red line was set to run from the downtown core through Mont Royal, heading northwards before splitting into two portions, one heading towards Cartierville and the other towards Montreal North. It would make use of pre-existing CN rails and would be partly above ground (Gilbert, 2021).



Jean Drapeau and Lucien Saulnier, chair of Montreal's executive committee, presenting the proposed metro network in 1961. Credit: Montreal Archives

Metro construction began on May 23, 1962, south of Berri Street and Jarry Street. Every station's design was assigned to a different architect, giving each a unique look, which is one of the defining characteristics of the Montreal metro to this day.

## A change of priority and the inauguration of the metro

1963-1967

The red line did not make it to the final metro plan and was cancelled in June of 1963. While several obstacles inhibited its completion, such as the incompatibility between its planned outdoor component and the non-weather-resistant rubber wheels to be used, the main reason for its cancellation was that another major opportunity had come knocking: Expo 67 (Magder, 2018). The 1967 world fair was seen as instrumental in positioning Montreal as a city defined by modernity and innovation, and in putting it on the map at the global scale (The Canadian Press, 2017). Once Montreal was set to host the event on the island of Île-Sainte-Hélène, located south of the city, connecting it to the city center by public transit took precedence over the red line.

The metro was officially inaugurated on the 14th of October 1966 at the Berri-de-Montigny station (now Berri-UQAM). The first 20 metro stations were opened, and over one million passengers rode the metro on its first weekend (Scott, 2016). The metro service gradually expanded as stations were completed up until April 1967, when the yellow line was completed, and the orange and green lines had been expanded. This marked the completion of the initial Montreal metro system.

## Era of optimism

Late 60s-1975

The late 1960s marked an era of formidable optimism in Montreal on the heels of the new metro and Expo 67, which was a resounding success as the most attended World's Fair in the 20th century (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2016). There was the feeling that anything was possible, and this optimism was reflected in the ambition of the projected metro plans of the era, which included nine lines stretching far across the island and over 112 km in length, although a project of this scale was never realized (Dufour, n.d.-b).



A recreation of an ambitious metro plan from the era. Credit: Marc Dufour

The momentum generated by the major projects of the 1960s led to Jean Drapeau's re-election in October 1970, when he won with 92.5% of the vote. The power this granted him led to his most ambitious and controversial project of his tenure: the 1976 Olympics. Montreal was awarded the 1976 summer Olympics in May of 1970, and, at around the same time, was subsequently granted a \$430 million dollar loan for the expansion of the orange and green lines as well as the construction of a new blue line. The province was to pay for the expansion, leading to more ambitious plans for 1978 (Magder, 2017).

The blue line was to run from northeastern Lachine to Montreal North, the west branch of the orange line was to be expanded northwards, and the green line to be extended towards the southwest and east (Noakes, 2021). It was hoped that the extensions would promote development in different parts of the city, particularly in less prosperous neighbourhoods (Gilbert, 2021).

## Olympic fallout

### 1976-1978

Despite lofty plans, several factors inhibited their completion by 1978. In the 1970s, Quebec was in the midst of constructing a number of megaprojects, including the Mirabel Airport, James Bay hydroelectric plants, and, most notably, the venues for the 1976 Olympics. Costs rapidly ballooned, particularly for Olympic infrastructure, whose price tag had been driven up from \$430 million in 1972 to \$1.6 billion in 1975 (Gilbert, 2021). The explosion in costs and associated rampant corruption dampened the optimism about Drapeau's grandiose vision of the city (Magder, 2017).

The cost of excavation for metro expansions shot up as well. Because the rubber tires could not withstand Montreal's harsh outdoor conditions, the metro had no choice but to remain underground for any future extension. However, this had become prohibitively expensive and complicated to execute, particularly now that the metro reached into less densely populated suburbs (Magder, 2017).

The explosion of costs prompted the provincial government, headed by Robert Bourassa, to impose a moratorium on the metro expansion on May 19th, 1976. This represented a fundamental shift in the way that public transit would be approached in the city going forward. That said, the green line was still expanded, with the eastern portion extended towards Honoré Beaugrand station and the western portion towards Angrignon, which is the current western terminus (Gilbert, 2021).

## Moratorium lifted

### 1979-1988

The Lévesque administration, which came into office soon after the imposition of the moratorium, temporarily lifted it in order to expand the orange line and construct the blue line (Magder, 2017). However, much had changed since these extensions were first conceived of in 1971; an economic slowdown in the 1980s was compounded by the political and linguistic tensions that defined the 1970s resulting in the downscaling of the original plan (Wilson-Smith, 1985).

Several new lines, which planners had proposed in the 1970s, never saw the light of day. These included surface lines 6, 8, 10, and 11, which were to boost urban development in underserved areas without the prohibitive cost of building an underground line so far away from the city center (Giansetto, 1982). An underground line, line 7, nicknamed the white line, was also planned to run under Pie IX Boulevard, a major artery. However, all of these lines were rejected due to the economic slowdown in Montreal. Many of these lines wound up being replaced by commuter trains at a later date.

Changes to existing lines, however, were made. The orange line was extended to Côte-Vertu from 1980 to 1986, with the other planned stations extending up to the Bois-Franc train station cut to reduce costs. Similarly, the central portion of the originally-planned blue line was built between 1986 and 1988, with Acadie Station opening last and remaining the newest metro station on the island of Montreal to this day. Although consideration was given to an extension of the blue line eastward towards Anjou, financial constraints likely ended up being too prohibitive.

## Extension to Laval

### 1990-2007

No changes were made to the metro system over the course of the decade following the removal of government subsidies for public transportation in 1990 in response to the economic recession that the country was experiencing (Chartrand, 1991; Kabore, 2014).

It took eight years for major news to finally arrive: the orange line was to be extended to Laval. The population of Laval had reached more than 330,000, and over 47% of their trips had an area served by the metro as their destination. Given that many of these trips involved driving to the Henri-Bourassa metro terminus and parking in the streets nearby, major streets, the bridge, and the smaller streets surrounding the station had become saturated. A Laval extension was therefore deemed necessary (Ministère des transports, 1990).

In 2000, plans for the orange line extension to Laval were finalized, with three new stations planned: Cartier, de la Concorde, and Montmorency. Construction began in 2002 and was completed on April 26th, 2007 (Radio-Canada, 2022). The underground metro network has remained unchanged since.

## Barriers to expansion

### 2010s-present

Since the completion of the modern-day metro network, extensions of the metro have been requested and studied, but have almost always been traded for other projects or shelved altogether. A southward extension of the yellow line into Brossard was briefly considered, as there was the need for a major east-west transportation corridor, but was ultimately replaced by a tramway project that is set to fulfill this purpose (CBC News, 2019; Corneau, 2020). Similarly, an extension of the orange line to the Bois-Franc commuter train station from Côte-Vertu Station has been envisaged in metro plans that stretch back to the 1960s and remains highly requested, but any official commitment from the provincial government has yet to be made, although it has been researched several times (Sargeant, 2022).

Despite the amount of time that has passed since the last metro expansion, the concept continues to inspire enthusiasm among Montrealers. This was exemplified by the fanfare that surrounded the proposed pink line, which was the cornerstone of Valérie Plante's mayoral campaign in 2017. Its ambition and potential to desaturate the crowded orange line generated a tremendous amount of press and excitement, but it was ultimately judged too expensive, too similar to pre-existing lines, and unable to address the more pressing need to improve public transit access in the east of the city (Barbeau, 2018; Radio-Canada, 2018). Nonetheless, the attention it drew despite its tremendous, near-impossible scale was a testament to the power that the distinctive image of an expanded metro holds (Tiranti, 2021). As some things easy to visualize and still largely associated with Montreal's rise as a modern metropolis, it is no wonder that potential expansions to the metro system remain highly anticipated despite the lack of progress in recent years.

The exception to this lack of progress is the blue line extension to Anjou. Since its initial announcement in the 1970s, money was put aside for it in 1998, 2001, 2010, 2015, 2018, 2019, and 2020 (Noakes, 2021). Only now does construction appear to have truly begun, but the extension has already been fraught with complications. While it was originally scheduled for 2026 at a cost of \$3.9 billion, it is now set to be completed in 2029 at a cost of \$6.4 billion, due to the increase in expropriation costs over the last few years (CBC News, 2021). Interestingly, despite past frugality with regards to the metro system, the project is still being pushed through regardless of the cost, as citizens in the east end have been waiting for "too long", and there is a determination to finally deliver on the promise of the extension (The Canadian Press, 2022).

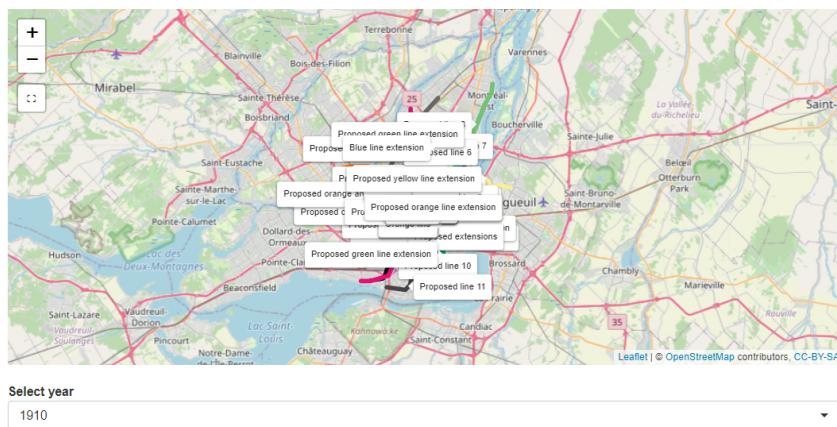
## A new era for transit?

Despite the consistent desire from residents for an expanded underground metro system, the future of public transit in Montreal appears to lie largely above ground. In 2016, the Réseau express métropolitain (REM) was announced by the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, a partnership between the provincial government and Québec's pension fund manager that took over financing of future infrastructure projects in the province (CBC News, 2015). With its ambitious mission to integrate the downtown core with the West Island, the North Shore, and the airport using one electric, mainly above ground light rail line, it is the largest public transit project in Montreal since the metro in 1966 (Réseau express métropolitain, 2019). Construction is now well underway, and service to the Brossard section of the line is set to begin in Fall 2022.



The Montreal metro network as it stands today, including the new REM, which is currently under construction. *Réseau Express métropolitain*  
 The REM, along with the South Shore tramway as a replacement for a yellow line extension, appears to indicate an ongoing shift towards above ground projects. Although the image of an expanded metro system holds immense power, in the eyes of those footing the bill it simply no longer appears to be worthwhile. What was once a major investment that would impart increased status on the city has largely become a source of complication and exorbitant cost. It remains to be seen what will be planned after the completion of the blue line towards Anjou, but the trend is clear: above ground projects appear to be the future of transit in Montreal.

Despite the lack of progress on the underground metro in recent years, it still represents an important component of Montreal's rise and entry on the world stage. Whether it gets one more expansion or dozens more in the future, its iconic imagery and importance to its millions of users will ensure that its importance as a symbol of Montreal will persist.



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