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Quebec / Local News

EMSB's Joe Ortona calls on mayoral candidates to speak out against Bill 96

The bill would affect how services are delivered to the city's English-speaking minority, said the candidate for Loyola.

Jason Magder • Montreal Gazette
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Joe Ortona, chair of the English Montreal School Board, is running as an independent city councillor in the Loyola district in the

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Joe Ortona said Montrealers deserve to know where their mayoral candidates stand on Quebec's language law bill, because the law would affect how city services are delivered to English-speakers.

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“The candidates should pronounce themselves for or against [Bill 96](#); Montrealers should know this prior to voting,” said Ortona, who was dumped from mayoral candidate Denis Coderre’s party after the English Montreal School Board that he chairs took a position against the proposed law.

Ortona declared himself an independent candidate for the Loyola district on Tuesday and said he will defend all his community’s interests. Bill 96, [An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec](#), reinforces the charter of the French language, and would be bad for English speakers in the city, he contends.

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The original motion also called into question the nationhood of Quebec, which led Quebec Premier François Legault to condemn the board as a “radical” group, and for Coderre to banish Ortona from running under his party banner. The motion has since been amended.

Ortona said his stance against the bill hasn’t changed.

“There are more than just concerns in Bill 96. It’s a discriminatory bill by definition. A bill that violates people’s rights and uses the notwithstanding clause is by definition discriminatory,” he said. “The use of the notwithstanding clause is an admission by the government that the bill is discriminatory.”

He added minority groups are interested to know where the mayoral candidates stand.

“Are they in favour of the complete removal of English services at the municipal level in a borough like Côte-des-Neiges—Notre-Dame-de-Grâce that doesn’t have bilingual status? Are they in favour of consultation on major changes to a residential or commercial artery that would be exclusively in French? Are they in favour of city councillors or city administrators refusing to serve citizens in English? These are all things that are in the bill, and absolutely no one is talking about it.”

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In a statement, Projet Montréal spokesperson Catherine Cadotte said the party supports Bill 96, because it reinforces the tools already put in place by the Plante administration to assure the continuity of the French language in Montreal.

However, the party believes there is freedom in the law to provide “adapted services” to citizens.

“We are working with the key stakeholders to reinforce the use of French while recognizing the historic aspect of the English community in Montreal,” Cadotte wrote. “Ensemble Montréal has tied itself in knots and engaged in double speak over this question. We are proud to live in a metropolis that distinguishes itself in North America because of its language.”

Speaking for Ensemble Montréal, Elizabeth Lemay said it’s possible to protect both English and French.

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“What Ensemble Montréal wants is to put forward the importance of respect and living together; Montreal is where Molière meets Shakespeare: the rights of all must be respected in order to achieve balance,” Lemay said. “It is important to protect the rights of the English-speaking communities, while ensuring the enhancement and protection of the French language in Quebec.”

Both Courage — Équipe Sue Montgomery and Balarama Holness’s Movement Montreal have taken stances firmly opposed to Bill 96.

Ortona accused Coderre of sending mixed messages about the bill. That allows him to seek the support of cultural communities and minorities, while at the same time appealing to language hawks.

He said, however, he’s not simply a one-issue candidate. As a Loyola councillor, he would also work to improve governance, better fund the borough, and improve services for citizens. Running against Ortona are Paolo Trani for [Team CDN NDG](#), [Annalisa Harris](#) of Courage, Gabriel Retta for [Ensemble Montréal](#), Despina Sourias for [Projet Montréal](#) and Joel DeBellefeuille for [Movement Montreal](#).

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