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Whoa, boy: Animal-rights defenders tell Mayor Denis Coderre to back off on Montreal rodeo

By Graeme Hamilton

Animal-rights activists are stepping up a campaign to have the rodeo shut down on the grounds that the horses and bulls suffer as they try to eject...

MONTREAL - Despite attempts to portray Montreal as a town with a rich rodeo tradition, this summer's festival featuring bucking broncos in the Vieux Port has always seemed like an odd choice to mark the city's 375th anniversary.

Now, animal-rights activists are stepping up a campaign to have the rodeo shut down on the grounds that the horses and bulls suffer as they try to throw their riders.

A petition calling for the cancellation of the rodeo, launched April 20 by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, had drawn more than 13,000 signatures by Tuesday morning. And rodeo opponents say that if the administration of Mayor Denis Coderre does not cancel the "barbaric" event, they are considering a legal challenge under the strict animal-welfare legislation Quebec adopted in 2015.

"Rodeos, which subject animals to fear, stress and undue risk of injury and death - all for the purposes of 'entertainment' - are just completely unacceptable, specifically within the context of the new legislation and the new status we've given to animals in this province," said Alanna Devine, director of animal advocacy for the SPCA.

When the rodeo was announced last November, Coderre said "country is part of the fabric of our history and of popular culture," and this week the city stuck by its decision to "bring a taste of country culture" to the anniversary celebrations. In the face of criticism from members of the public at a council meeting Monday, Anie Samson, vice-chairman of the executive committee, said she is satisfied the animals will be well treated.

"The rodeo will take place in August," she said. "The people who want to come will come."

About 150 kilometres northeast of Montreal in the town of Saint-Tite, where you are more likely to bump into a cowboy than in the streets of Montreal, Pascal Lafrenière, general manager of the Festival Western de Saint-Tite, is puzzled by the controversy.

Started 50 years ago with a rodeo in a baseball park, the festival now attracts 600,000 people a year, and it has never encountered the kind of opposition that is mounting against the Montreal event. The Saint-Tite festival has been commissioned to organize Montreal's "NomadFest urban rodeo" from Aug. 24-27.

Lafrenière said the allegations of cruel treatment that he hears - electric prods and straps around animals' testicles to provoke bucking - are false. "We have the same passion for animals as the people who don't believe we should be using them," he said.

Rodeo supporters call bucking the natural movement of an animal that has not been trained to be ridden.

"It is natural for a horse to buck. We do not restrain it," Lafrenière said, suggesting the SPCA could find examples of abuse a lot closer to home: "A parrot has its wings cut in a pet store. There are dozens of pet stores in Montreal in which there are snakes in aquariums, tarantulas in aquariums, fish in aquariums. That's not their natural habitat."

Devine countered that bucking may be natural, but it is a reaction "to stress or an unpleasant sensation." Nearly 600 veterinarians and veterinary technicians last month signed a letter calling for the rodeo to be scrapped. In an article published in Huffington Post, veterinarian Jean-Jacques Kona-Boun, said the rodeo flies in the face of Quebec's efforts to improve its reputation for poor protection of animals.

"Approving such an activity that is violent and contemptuous of animal welfare is not at all a tribute to Montreal but rather an insult to the city and to Quebec," he wrote.

Quebec rodeo promoters may regret ever bringing their show to the big city and tying it to the heavily scrutinized 375th anniversary celebrations. Devine said legal experts and veterinarians are discussing a court challenge to stop the event, and in a commentary published Tuesday in *La Presse*, Université de Montréal law professor Alain Roy said they would have a strong case.

Quebec's 2015 Animal Welfare and Safety Act recognized animals were "sentient beings that have biological needs" and outlawed any actions that "cause a animal to be in distress."



Graham Hughes / CP Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre speaks during a news conference in Montreal, Thursday, November 24, 2016, where he announced a heritage legacy to mark Montreal's 375th anniversary.

Roy said the legislation reflected a new animal-welfare paradigm in Quebec, one that has place for rodeos. "It must be noted that a rodeo, regardless of the precautions that are taken and the high standards that are followed, simply does not fit with the definition of the animal being that Quebec adopted in 2015," he wrote.

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• Email: gghamilton@nationalpost.com¹ | Twitter: [grayhamilton](https://twitter.com/grayhamilton)²

References

1. gghamilton@nationalpost.com
2. twitter.com/grayhamilton

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