

## **Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods**

<b>Date:</b>	September 7, 2012
<b>To:</b>	Board of Health
<b>From:</b>	Dr. David McKeown, Medical Officer of Health
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

### **SUMMARY**

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Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods are home to a large number of residents from diverse communities. These neighbourhoods face many challenges in becoming healthier, including limited access to services and amenities. Even small enhancements such as introducing an outdoor fresh food market or new businesses such as a hair salon, day care or café may face barriers associated with zoning requirements. This report outlines ways to support healthier apartment neighbourhoods through a series of specific strategies and design opportunities. Realizing these opportunities requires a combination of enabling City policies and means of supporting individual and coordinated private, non-profit and public sector investment.

Boards of Health are required by the Ontario Public Health Standards 2008 (OPHS) to work with municipalities to support the development of healthy public policies regarding the built environment. As evidence linking the built environment to health outcomes continues to grow, public health units are increasingly involved with planning departments to integrate health principles into land-use planning policy.

The purpose of this report is to examine Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods through a health lens, a half-century following their construction. The attached report, *Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods*, examines the opportunities for improving the health of those who live in Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods by applying the current-day understanding of healthy communities. The report was prepared in consultation with Tower Renewal Office and City Planning and provides health-based evidence and a policy rationale to complement work in a forthcoming apartment neighbourhood zoning study by the United Way Toronto (UWT) and the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal (CUG+R).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### **The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:**

1. The Board of Health forward this report to the Chief Planner and Executive Director of City Planning and the Project Director Tower Renewal Office to support and inform the current Zoning By-law amendment and harmonization processes and the Official Plan review underway.
2. The Board of Health forward this report to the Planning and Growth Management Committee for consideration at its October 12, 2012 meeting where zoning regulation reform recommendations will be reviewed in conjunction with the current Comprehensive Zoning By-law and Official Plan reviews.
3. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to collaborate with the Chief Planner and Executive Director of City Planning, Project Director Tower Renewal and the President and CEO, United Way Toronto on the Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw review process underway.
4. The Board of Health forward this report to the Ontario Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing and Infrastructure and request that the findings be considered by the Province as part of the current five-year review of the *Provincial Policy Statement* and as part of the ongoing implementation of the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH)*, to further support the revitalization of apartment neighbourhoods and the health of residents living in these neighbourhoods in Toronto and the GGH region.
5. The Board of Health forward this report to the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA), Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD), Canadian Association of Business Incubation, Canadian Institute of Planners, Canadian Public Health Association, Canadian Urban Institute, Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael's Hospital, Centre for Social Innovation, Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario, Cites Centre at University of Toronto, Federation of Rental-housing Providers of Ontario, FoodShare, Greater Toronto Apartment Association, Martin Prosperity Institute, Metrolinx, Minister of Health and Long Term Care, Ontario Professional Planners Institute, Ontario Public Health Association, Public Health Ontario, Social Innovation Generation @ MaRS, Toronto Board of Trade, Toronto Business Development Centre, Toronto Food Business Incubator, Toronto Transit Commission, United Way Toronto, Urban Public Health Network, Urban Land Institute Toronto, Wellesley Institute and the Medical Officers of Health for the regions of Peel Durham, Halton, Peel and York.

### **Financial Impact**

There are no financial impacts from the adoption of this report.

### **DECISION HISTORY**

At its October 17, 2011 meeting the Board of Health (BOH) received the report *Healthy Toronto by Design (HTDB)*. This report provided an overview of the many ways cities

influence health and highlights the role of city governments in improving health. This report is part of this series of reports applying the HTBD framework to municipal public policy issues and their relationship to health.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2011.HL8.1>).

At its meeting of April 2, 2012, the Board of Health received the report *Healthy Toronto by Design: Current Research and Policy Initiatives for a Healthy Built Environment* which provided an overview of research and policy work on the built environment being done by TPH in partnership with other City divisions. This report noted that the Medical Officer of Health would report to the Board of Health on these initiatives individually as they are completed, including this report on enabling healthier apartment neighbourhoods <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.HL12.1>).

At its February 21, 2012 meeting the Economic Development Committee reviewed and adopted the recommendations from the *Growing Toronto's Economy: Toward a Strategic Plan* report that provides an overview of the strategic plan to grow the economy in Toronto. The recommendations from this report fit well with the proposed reforms to create economic opportunities within Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods. The Medical Officer of Health has supported the plan's objectives to increase employment and improve job quality noting how health drives innovation and economic growth, and business depends on a healthy productive workforce.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.ED11.4>)

At its May 17, 2012 meeting, the Planning and Growth Management Committee received the report *Apartment Infill in Toronto: A Ten Year Review* from the Tower Renewal Office and requested that Planning work with United Way Toronto, Tower Renewal Office, Social Development Finance and Administration Division, Economic Development and Culture Division and other key stakeholders to examine zoning policy reforms as part of the Harmonized Zoning By-law review underway and report back at the October 12, 2012 meeting

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.PG14.2> ).

## **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

### **The Role of Toronto Public Health in Planning for a Healthier Toronto**

The *Healthy Toronto by Design* report submitted to the Board of Health in October 2011 describes the relationships and interactions of social, economic, and environmental factors in determining population health and health equity in Toronto. The report describes many of the health challenges faced by Torontonians, how the built environment influences health outcomes and the means by which the City's agencies, boards and divisions can create conditions to improve the health of all Torontonians and reduce inequities. TPH is collaborating with City Planning and other City divisions on issues and initiatives related to the built environment, with the intent of strengthening health and equity considerations in decision-making and program implementation.

In March 2012, TPH and City Planning co-hosted a roundtable to review the Official Plan (OP) using a health and equity lens. The roundtable workshop brought together leaders in city planning and public health as well as representatives and leaders from the City's Transportation Services, community organizations, researchers, and local, federal and provincial health agencies. A number of ideas on how to build a healthier and more equitable Toronto were discussed and issues related to the implementation of OP policies including the pivotal role of zoning were highlighted in the discussions.

### **The Opportunities for Change in Toronto's Apartment Neighbourhoods**

As outlined in the attached report, a growing number of recent reports from The United Way, Cities Centre at the University of Toronto, the Wellesley Institute, Tower Renewal Office, Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael's Hospital and Toronto Public Health have highlighted the growing income divide and health disparities that are occurring in Toronto and are especially concentrated in apartment neighbourhoods. Collectively these studies reveal that the populations that live in many of Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods have lower incomes, experience higher rates of chronic disease such as type 2 diabetes, have less access to fresh food, live in less walkable and bike-able neighbourhoods, and are more vulnerable to extreme heat than other residents in Toronto.

The City of Toronto's Tower Renewal Office has been driving a broad range of environmental, social, economic, and cultural changes and improvements in Toronto's concrete apartment towers and the neighbourhoods that surround them. The Tower Renewal Office has been working on a range of solutions and pilots, including green retrofits and infrastructure, urban agriculture, improved transportation options, new housing and community improvements to help revitalize these neighbourhoods.

United Way Toronto's *Poverty by Postal Code 2: Vertical Poverty report* presented new research and data on the growing concentration of poverty in the City of Toronto within the high-rise apartment building neighbourhoods in particular. United Way Toronto (UWT) has been working in partnership with the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal (CUG+R) on examining the issue of current and potential zoning for tower neighbourhoods. The forthcoming Apartment Neighbourhood Zoning Study to be released by UWT will document the current regulatory constraints in apartment neighbourhoods and outline alternative zoning frameworks to enhance planning at the neighbourhood scale. The attached report *Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods* documents complementary work conducted by TPH to look at the potential community and health impacts of proposed zoning changes being recommended by UWT and CUG+R and serves as a companion to their forthcoming report.

## **COMMENTS**

### **The Changing Face of Apartment Neighbourhoods**

Today Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods present the paradox of having physically changed remarkably little, while at the same time experiencing the most significant changes in neighbourhood demographics of any neighbourhood type. These neighbourhoods have increasingly become home to a diverse population which includes residents with growing families, the elderly and new Canadians. These residents face

increasingly higher rates of poverty and chronic diseases (such as type 2 diabetes, obesity and heart disease). Often described as arrival cities, these neighbourhoods are characterized by increasing trends for ethnic diversity, low rates of car ownership, and demand for a broad range of goods, services and amenities that were not conceived in their original planning or design.

The apartment neighbourhoods this report focuses on are the older concrete mid-rise or high-rise buildings built in the 1950s to the early 1980s in low-income, low-development-growth, car-oriented areas, with a narrow range of retail and service uses within a five minute walk (about half a kilometre), primarily in the inner suburbs (in particular areas of Etobicoke, Scarborough and North York). The Toronto region contains North America's second highest concentration of these buildings. There are over 1,000 rental high-rise buildings in Toronto, many occurring in clusters of 5 or more towers, with over 280,000 apartments that represent half of the City's rental housing stock. These ageing buildings are often overcrowded, energy inefficient and have few community services and amenities available to them. Although the current conditions at many of these buildings are lacking in environmental, social and economic benefits, there is a vital opportunity for revitalizing the buildings themselves and the immediate neighbourhood.

### **The Distinct Roles of the Official Plan and Zoning By-laws**

There are a number challenges to making apartment neighbourhoods healthier communities. However, one of the areas the City of Toronto can directly address is the land use planning framework that is in place in these neighbourhoods. Two of the elements of this planning framework are the Official Plan (OP) and the Zoning By-laws. The report *Planning for a Healthier Toronto: Enhanced Opportunities through the Official Plan* to be presented at the September 24 Board of Health meeting highlights a number of recommendations for the OP for city as a whole including tower neighbourhoods.

The City of Toronto recognizes Apartment Neighbourhoods as distinct areas within the City, and has given them a special designation within the Official Plan. This designation has been developed as a result of the distinct physical characteristics of apartment tower sites; where the boundaries of apartment neighbourhoods have been defined by identifying the location of existing clusters of high-rise apartment developments. According to the Official Plan, apartment neighbourhoods are considered primarily residential areas that may contain small-scale institutional, commercial and community uses that directly service the local neighbourhoods.

As outlined by the Planning Act, an official plan sets out a municipality's general policies and overall vision for future land use. A zoning by-law serves to implement the objectives, policies and vision of a municipality's official plan; provides a legal framework for managing land use and future development and construction; and serves to protect the community from conflicting and potentially dangerous land uses. The City is currently undergoing a process to harmonize the different zoning laws that existed prior to amalgamation. The Planning and Growth committee has recommended that proposed

changes to zoning in apartment neighbourhoods be considered as part this harmonization process and that a City wide by-law be drafted to take advantage of the zoning changes presented at its May 17, 2012 meeting.

If someone wants to use or develop a property in a way not allowed by the zoning by-law, they may apply for a zoning by-law amendment from Council or minor variance through the Committee of Adjustment. Changes can be considered only if the new use is allowed by the official plan. While the current Official Plan supports some mixed-use within Apartment Neighbourhoods, the zoning by-laws are often less flexible. Within these post-war suburban areas, apartment clusters were generally conceived as exclusively residential areas, whereas commercial, social and cultural amenities were located within what was considered convenient driving distance, but were not generally incorporated into these apartment neighbourhoods. This concept of separated land uses was codified in the City's zoning by-laws for apartment properties and has remained largely unchanged for the half century since they were originally designed. The process of amending zoning bylaws is lengthy and costly. As a result of these 'legacy regulations', Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods have been unable to respond to changing concepts of community development or to the changing needs of their residents. (For more information regarding the policy context and barriers within apartment neighbourhoods, see the forthcoming United Way Toronto report).

### **Building Healthy Apartment Neighbourhoods by Design**

This report is based on the notion that healthy cities are cities that are liveable, prosperous and sustainable; that they have high quality built and natural environments; that they provide for the needs of their population in an equitable and sustainable fashion; and that they support and foster health and well-being. This report articulates the view that healthy cities don't just happen; that they result from creative vision, strategic decision-making and thoughtful implementation that reflects the needs and the challenges of all of its residents. The attached report utilizes the following themes identified in the TPH report *Healthy Toronto by Design* (2011) and applies them to the scale of the apartment neighbourhood, including: Natural Environment; Built Environment; Transportation; Housing, Income and Employment; Education and Learning; Food Security; and Health Services

The aim of this background study is to expand on research related to city-wide health and illustrate how public health objectives can be achieved through design interventions directed at apartment neighbourhoods. It is hoped that these design interventions can be used as a tools that can be applied to apartment neighbourhoods across the City to help each to become more 'complete' communities that support and foster the health and well-being of their residents. In this context, each of the eight themes is considered as an important aspect of a neighbourhood. The eight themes examined in the background report serve to illuminate the range of barriers and opportunities that can apply to apartment neighbourhoods and their impact on health and well-being. Based on this framing, the report provides several examples of current barriers to complete and healthy tower neighbourhoods. An overview of these barriers is outlined in Attachment 1 at the end of this report.

## **The Opportunities for Enhancing the Health of Apartment Neighbourhoods**

Today, five decades after their formation, apartment neighbourhoods remain a vital aspect of the city's housing stock. They represent half the rental housing in the City of Toronto, and a large part of the City's affordable rental housing for families. Apartment neighbourhoods are a vital asset to the overall health of the city.

As has been discussed above, apartment neighbourhoods are facing challenges in terms of neighbourhood vitality and the health and well being of their residents. However, these neighbourhoods also have specific inherent qualities that could be used to foster and support healthy living.

These positive qualities form the basis of the strategies outlined in the attached report and is summarized as follows:

- They have underutilized open spaces that could accommodate a range of new activities, uses and buildings, which could contribute to healthier lifestyles and improved well-being in apartment neighbourhoods.
- Apartment neighbourhoods are typically large communities, often including a population of thousands people, which makes them comparable to small towns. These neighbourhoods have a dense population of people with diverse backgrounds who can support and engage in local enterprises, services and agencies. They have the population and community diversity needed to foster local economic networks, as happens in a village, a small town, or a well established urban quarter.
- Today, residents of apartment neighbourhoods already walk, cycle, and take transit more than the average Torontonians. Physical improvements to these neighbourhoods can make these mobility choices safer and more desirable, thereby further enabling healthy active transportation.
- Apartment tower clusters comprise robust and flexible buildings, which can be adapted, modified or expanded in a way that better supports health and well-being.
- As they were originally planned, apartment neighbourhoods were designed as places for healthy and safe living, as places that provided rental housing close to natural landscapes, open spaces, fresh air and sun light.
- There is a strong consensus among public health experts about the importance of enabling neighbourhoods to support and foster healthy living. This consensus extends across three levels of government, community health advocates, academic researchers and residents of apartment neighbourhoods in Toronto.
- Lastly, as they are largely situated within areas of low-density single-detached housing, apartment neighbourhoods could, in the future, be transformative catalysts for making suburban areas more amenable to healthy living.

Apartment neighbourhoods provide a solid foundation from which to build more vibrant, diverse and healthy communities. Their specific built form characteristics offer a flexible and resilient framework for positive neighbourhood change.

## **Informing Improvements to the Provincial Policy Statement and the Growth Plans**

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is responsible for the Planning Act and Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) that serve as the basis and framework for municipal official plans and zoning by-laws. The PPS provides policy direction on land use planning to promote strong communities, a clean and healthy environment and a strong economy including support for mixed land uses. The current PPS came into effect on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 and is at present undergoing a review as required by the Planning Act. The goal of the review is to ensure the province's land use planning policies are effectively protecting Ontario's interests and to determine whether any changes need to be made to the policies.

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006) and the Places to Grow Act (2005) serve as a 25-year plans that aim to: create complete, compact communities; revitalize neighbourhoods; provide more housing options; protect farmland and natural areas; reduce gridlock by improving transportation options; and make more efficient use of infrastructure and urban land. The Ministry of Infrastructure responsible for the growth plans has examined the role and importance of revitalizing apartment tower neighbourhoods in the Greater Golden Horseshoe as part of the area's Growth Plan. It is vital that when the growth plans are reviewed in the future, the findings in this report be considered to help to further support the revitalization of apartment neighbourhoods.

## **Conclusion**

The strategies outlined in this report recommend engaging in entrepreneurial, social enterprise and institutional ventures in areas of the city where these activities have historically not flourished. Key to enabling and ensuring the success of these ventures is creating a clear framework with all stakeholders for engagement, and building skills, knowledge and capacity to invigorate ventures and ensure their success. Removing the identified regulatory and policy barriers and establishing an enabling urban planning framework for the strategies outlined in this report as part of the Official Plan Review and Comprehensive Zoning process currently underway will aid in building community capacity.

As with all areas of the city, Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods are complex and diverse. There is no panacea for achieving the opportunities outlined in this report. Rather, progress will be made through a series of incremental and related strategies for the short and long term. This report does however identify the relationship between the urban planning framework and proposed solutions, specifically with respect to the City's Official Plan and Zoning By-law. While many policies are enabling, particularly those of the Official Plan, many regulatory barriers still exist, both in the City's Zoning By-law and other municipal regulations. Identifying and removing the barriers in the urban planning framework is a first and crucial step in enabling the strategic direction outlined in this report.

Removing the current regulatory barriers to investment and economic development that exist in some apartment neighbourhoods will aid in unleashing the potential of individuals and the private and non-profit sectors in investing in these neighbourhoods.



Through both expanded economic and social vitality, as well as patterns of built form and land use, apartment neighbourhoods can move toward becoming more "complete" and healthy places.

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## **SIGNATURE**

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## **ATTACHMENT**

Attachment 1 - Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods