



Housing Action Now
489 College Street, Suite 205
Toronto, Ontario M6G 1A5
Phone: 416-924-4244, Ext. 225
Fax: 416-924-5904
E-mail: hurdb@lao.on.ca

Housing Action Now
Budget Feedback For Executive Committee
Monday, February 2, 2015

Housing Action Now (HAN) is a coalition of Toronto residents and community organizations that advocates for safe, decent and affordable housing for all Torontonians. Below are our comments and recommendations regarding the 2015 City of Toronto draft budget. We hope that you take our concerns into consideration as you negotiate this year's budget.

On affordable housing:

Toronto must invest in building more affordable housing. The waitlist for affordable housing in Toronto continues to grow each year, with most recent figures indicating that there are 168,972 people waiting for an affordable place to live.

In the past four years (or over the last term of Council) the waitlist grew by 26,417 people, while only 2,186 more units of affordable housing were created. This indicates that **the need for affordable housing is growing 12 times faster than affordable housing is being built.** In 2009, Toronto set a realistic goal, detailed in the Housing Opportunities Toronto Action Plan, of an additional 10,000 affordable units by 2020. We are at the halfway point in this action plan, and it is looking extremely unlikely that we will reach that goal.

In recent years, Council has committed significant capital dollars to public transit expansion, in spite of a commitment by another level of government to fund the expansion itself. We recognize that the federal and provincial governments have a primary responsibility to ensure that Torontonians—and all Canadians—can access decent housing, however, we look to the City of Toronto to be a leader and take action at the local level, especially when other levels of government aren't committing adequate funds. If the City can afford to turn down provincial funding for transit expansion when funds *are* committed and instead find a billion dollars of its own to fund it (and the cost of cancelling contracts), surely the City can figure out how to find a similar amount to fund affordable housing development when other levels of government *aren't* funding it adequately.

Council has demonstrated that political will can overcome the biggest financial hurdles, even in times of constraint. This budget commits **nothing** to the building of new affordable housing. We hope that Councillors care as much about Torontonians having access to decent, permanent housing as they do about traffic congestion.

- ⇒ **We ask Council to demonstrate a commitment to investing in building affordable housing that is equal to its commitment to investing in public transit expansion.**

- ⇒ **We ask Council to consider creating a dedicated fund for affordable housing, like many other Canadian cities have (Vancouver, Victoria, London, etc.),** as we believe it could help address many of our housing issues, including facilitating the construction of new affordable housing.

Making housing more affordable is key to reducing poverty in Toronto, and providing housing allowances is the fastest way to make housing affordable for more people.

⇒ **We ask Council to consider using funds from the Poverty Reduction Strategy to expand Toronto's housing allowance program beyond the additional 75 households that this budget aims to help.**

On 24-hour drop-ins and shelter capacity:

HAN supports the inclusion of increased funding to expand shelter capacity and improve services for people who are homeless, which includes the opening of the two new 24-hour drop-ins for women that Council approved last year. In the absence of a sufficient supply of affordable housing, these shelters and other supports are vital.

The budget states that the overall occupancy of Toronto's homeless shelters will be brought down to 86.9%. However, focusing on "overall" occupancy obscures the fact that the City is projecting that shelters for homeless adult men will be at 92% occupancy for 2015. Given that homeless adult men make up half of the city's homeless population, we are concerned that shelter overcrowding will continue to be a problem for a significant proportion of shelter users.

⇒ **We ask Council to add enough funding to the budget to bring occupancy in Toronto's men's shelters down to the Council-approved 90%.**

The tragic deaths last month of four men who were homeless are prompting a reconsideration of the Emergency Cold Weather Alert threshold. If the Cold Weather Alert threshold is lowered, as we hope it will be, it's likely that the City will see an increase in the number of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts that are issued each year. We are concerned that people will continue to freeze to death on the street, even if the threshold is lowered, if money isn't set aside now.

⇒ **We ask Council to add money to the budget now to support the additional services that will be required in the event that the Extreme Cold Weather Alert threshold is lowered this year.**

On TCHC capital repair/maintenance:

In 2013, Council passed a 10-year capital plan to address TCHC's \$751 million capital repair backlog. Because provincial and federal investment was key to the plan, Council allocated \$40,000 for advocacy initiatives aimed at getting the federal and provincial governments to contribute their fair share. The Close the Housing Gap campaign was launched as a result. Since neither order of government has committed the funds yet, there is obviously a lot more work to be done.

⇒ **We ask Council to use a significant portion of the funds used to support the Close the Housing Gap Campaign to contract community organizations that have community organizing expertise and networks on the ground to help build the City's advocacy campaign by working with and mobilizing TCHC tenants and other Toronto residents, as we believe the City's advocacy efforts will be more successful if the capacity of local housing advocates to engage in housing advocacy directed at the provincial and federal governments is increased.**

On tenant outreach and organizing:

In a city with a significant housing and homelessness crisis, the tenant hotline, outreach services for tenants facing rent increases, and the fund for tenants who need to hire legal representation, which are all financed in part

by tenant outreach and organizing funding, are vital. These services significantly contribute to the affordability and adequacy of housing for Toronto's residents and prevent homelessness by providing vulnerable tenants with the resources they need to keep their landlords from taking advantage of and abusing them. In 2014, outreach services saved 23,000 tenants, collectively, one million dollars in rent. Each year the tenant hotline takes 10,000 calls and the fund for tenant legal representation provides \$50,000 worth of legal services. Last year, the City put an additional \$75,000 in the budget for tenant outreach and organizing to reverse a cut in this area from 2011.

⇒ **We ask Council to return funding for tenant outreach and organizing to 2010 levels.**

⇒ **We ask Council to make this funding permanent,** recognizing that the services that are provided are basic services that are necessary to the proper functioning of the rental market, the preservation of housing adequacy and affordability, and the prevention of homelessness.

On repair and maintenance problems in private sector rental housing:

We support the budget's increased funding for the Multi-Residential Apartment Building audit program (MRAB). The repair and maintenance issues that tenants are faced with include bedbugs, pests, mould, asbestos, lead, inadequate heat, and sewage issues, and are issues that have a direct impact on residents' health. Landlords' neglect and abandonment of their responsibilities is a serious issue across the city, both in its prevalence and how it impacts tenants. In 2013, the City of Toronto audited 203 apartment buildings and issued landlords 531 work orders for 7,531 repair and maintenance deficiencies. Only 20% of those work orders were resolved by the year's end. There are still hundreds of work orders from 2009 that have yet to be resolved.

⇒ **We ask Council to recognize that while funding for two new enforcement officers is an important step in the right direction, much more work needs to be done in this term of Council to hold landlords accountable and to ensure that tenant rights are protected.**

On the 2016 budget:

We are very concerned with Mayor Tory's intention to direct all city departments to reduce their budgets by 2% in 2016. City staff have made it clear that the only way to achieve this 2% reduction will be to cut services. Given that services are already less than adequate in many areas and the population is growing, not shrinking, we are left wondering which of our neighbours will be left out in the cold, and whether they will survive the Mayor's 2% cut.

⇒ **We ask that Council consider an approach to next year's budget that will make Toronto a better place for all Torontonians to live, instead of one that will make Toronto a more difficult place to live in.**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this year's budget.



Melissa Goldstein,
Housing Action Now