

Tenant Advisory Committee Updates and 2021-2022 Work Plan

Date: May 31, 2021

To: Subcommittee on the Protection of Affordable Rental Housing

From: Executive Director, Housing Secretariat

Wards: All

SUMMARY

To support delivery of the HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan with specific focus on helping renters, the City's Protection of Affordable Rental Housing Advisory Group was established by the Planning and Housing Committee in December 2019 for staggered two-year terms.

On December 8, 2020, through Item PH19.8, the Planning and Housing Committee adopted a new mandate and terms of reference to support the creation of a Tenant Advisory Committee. The Committee also directed the Executive Director, Housing Secretariat to issue a call for members by the end of the fourth quarter of 2020. Following the call for members, the new Tenant Advisory Committee was officially created in March 2021.

This report provides an update on the work of the newly created Tenant Advisory Committee ("TAC"). As directed by the Planning and Housing Committee, TAC will work with City staff to develop annual work plans to advance the protection of affordable rental housing and tenancies. TAC will also provide advice and feedback on policy and program development aimed at preserving affordable housing in Toronto. Additionally, it will support City divisions involved in the development of renter-related services, policies, programs and consultations.

TAC has already begun its work to support City policies, programs and actions. This report outlines priorities identified by TAC and its proposed 2021-2022 work plan. Key areas of focus include the preservation of affordable housing, tenant rights, and ensuring well-maintained homes for renters. Specific projects proposed will focus on: renovictions; small site acquisitions; the creation of tenant hubs; development of proactive tenant communications; and testing and providing feedback on options for a RentSafeTO updated evaluation tool and interactive website.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Director, Housing Secretariat recommends that:

1. The Subcommittee on the Protection of Affordable Rental Housing receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan envisions a city in which all residents have equal opportunity to develop to their full potential. The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan is also centred on a human rights-based approach to housing. This approach recognizes that housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of a person and to building healthy, inclusive, sustainable and complete communities. A key component of a human-rights based approach is centred on ensuring people with lived experience have input into policy and program development.

The work of the Tenant Advisory Committee, comprised of people with lived experience, supports City efforts aimed at protecting renters and preventing illegitimate evictions and homelessness; improving housing stability; and protecting the stock of permanent affordable housing. This work will help lower-income and vulnerable individuals and families, as well as those from equity-seeking groups to access safe, healthy and adequate homes.

Access to good quality, safe, affordable housing is also an important determinant of health and improves the social and economic status of an individual. Good quality, affordable housing is also a cornerstone of vibrant, healthy neighbourhoods and supports the environmental and economic health of the city, region and country as a whole.

DECISION HISTORY

On December 8, 2020 the Planning and Housing Committee adopted a new mandate and terms of reference for the Tenant Advisory Committee as recommended by the Subcommittee on the Protection of Affordable Rental Housing. Staff were directed to recruit new members and with the new committee to develop annual work plans. City divisions working on policies and programs with a tenant impact were also directed to consult with the new committee. The full decision document can be found at:

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.PH19.8>.

COMMENTS

Background

One of the key priorities outlined in the HousingTO Plan is to ensure well-maintained and secure homes for renters. Additionally, the HousingTO Plan calls for actions to prevent homelessness and improve pathways to housing stability. A specific recommendation in the Action Plan was to create a Tenant Advisory Committee, including people with lived experience, to provide advice and guidance to the City, and to identify proactive solutions to support vulnerable tenants. This report provides an update on the creation of the Tenant Advisory Committee and the work it is undertaking to advance the HousingTO Action Plan.

Creation of Tenant Advisory Committee

Through Item PH19.8, the Planning and Housing Committee directed that the Tenant Advisory Committee become a permanent body to support the City in its efforts to help renters. Given the permanent nature of the new Tenant Advisory Committee, the Call for Members process was managed through the City Clerk's Appointment Process. City Clerk's posted the opportunity on its website and the Call was issued in late December 2020 with applications due at the end of January 2021. A total of fifty applications were received through this process.

Applicants were short-listed and staff interviewed twenty people over the month of February. Selected Committee members represent people with lived experience, tenant advocates, housing workers, legal clinics and right to housing advocates. Attachment 1 lists the members of the Tenant Advisory Committee.

The first meeting of TAC was held on March 27, 2021 and the Committee has been meeting bi-weekly since then.

City Engagement with the Tenant Advisory Committee

One of the directives from the Subcommittee on the Protection of Affordable Rental Housing was that City divisions undertaking work on tenant-related policies or programs engage with TAC. To date, the following key initiatives have been shared for input with TAC:

- The development of the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Service Plan;
- Proposals on Inclusionary Zoning and the definition of Affordable Rental Housing; and
- Potential enhancements to Shelter, Support and Housing Administration's tenant support services.

In early June, TAC will also be engaged on:

- The proposed Multi-Tenant Housing framework;
- Emergency Tenant Relocation Support and Protocols; and

- RentSafeTO initiatives.

TAC engagement by City staff to date has included consultation on both new and existing programs and projects, including some current projects nearing completion or in the final stages of consultation. TAC members have recommended early engagement on new initiatives moving forward, to allow for robust discussion and collaboration.

Priority Setting and Work Plan Development

TAC has met on a bi-weekly basis from March through end of May to scope and co-develop its initial work plan. Staff consolidated priorities based on: items raised by the Subcommittee; from deputations at Subcommittee; work identified from the previous deputations; issues raised by the fifty applicants through the TAC Call for Members process; recommendations from the past Advisory Committee; and recommendations from several recent reports on renter issues in Toronto. TAC members grouped the identified issues and created the following three working groups/ focus areas:

- Preservation of Affordable Rental Housing
- Tenant Rights
- Ensuring Well-Maintained Homes for Renters

Data collection and analysis were identified as being integral for TAC and the City to appropriately address various issues. The Housing Secretariat is working on a larger data strategy to support the implementation of the HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan. Data gaps and considerations identified by the working groups will be referred to staff to include in the data strategy.

The following is a high level summary of the work that TAC plans to undertake between now and March 2022. More details on the work plan are outlined in Attachment 2. In addition to the work outlined below, TAC will continue to engage with City divisions on other renter related policy and program development. Work plan considerations balanced priorities identified by TAC alongside staff's ability to undertake the work.

1) Preservation of Affordable Rental Housing

This working group will work with staff to protect the loss of affordable rental housing due to unit turnover through illegitimate evictions and/or displacement. Beginning now until March 2022 this group will:

- support the development of a framework to preserve the supply of deeply affordable housing - with a first report back on a proposed renoviction policy in Q4 2021; and
- provide input in the development of a small sites acquisition program (Q3 2021).

2) Tenant Rights

This working group will work with staff to build on some of the work done with the previous Advisory Committee on the Protection of Affordable Rental Housing to ensure tenants know their rights and how to exercise them. Between now and March 2022 this group will:

- support the distribution of and information sharing about the Eviction Toolkit (Q3 2021);

- inform the development and implementation of enhanced Tenant Support Program (Q3/Q4 2021);
- develop proactive communications material on rights to return, relocations and best practices on tenant engagement (Q4 2021);
- explore the development of a network of tenant associations (Q4 2021); and
- explore the development of tenant hubs across the City to support tenants' rights (2022).

3) Ensuring Well-Maintained Homes for Renters

This working group intends to work with City staff to ensure renters have well-maintained homes. One area of interest for this group is to see improvements to the RentSafeTO program. As a first step, this group will work with Municipal Licensing and Standards to:

- test and provide feedback on an interactive RentSafeTO web prototype that seeks to provide a portal for current and prospective tenants to access detailed information about registered apartment buildings (Q3 2021); and
- test and provide feedback on options for RentSafeTO updated evaluation tool, based on Council direction, that will update the criteria and approach for building evaluations. (Q4 2021).

Discussions are taking place between staff and this working group to identify other areas of collaboration with MLS and other City divisions to address issues related to well-maintained homes for renters.

Updates on Ongoing Staff Work

1) Eviction Prevention Tool Kit

In consultation with tenants, legal clinics, tenant associations and other stakeholders developed an Eviction Prevention Tool Kit that includes:

- A simplified description of the evictions process
- Clear steps and graphics that make the process easy to understand
- Material that helps residents reflect on what resources they need and how to plan and prepare to fight evictions
- Useful lists of City-funded tenant programs and organizations
- Template letters to landlords that help with communications

The purpose of the tool kit is to support Toronto residents in knowing their rights and improve tenant-landlord relations across the City. The need for this tool kit was identified through feedback from tenants as work was undertaken in 2020 to centralize tenant information on the website. The tool kit can be found online at www.toronto.ca/renterhelp in June 2021. The first version of the tool kit is available in some of Toronto's most spoken languages. Tenants expressed the need for hard copy material given limited access to technology. Hard copies will be distributed by community partners to tenants.

The tool kit will continue to be improved upon as feedback is received. On the front page of the tool kit, there is an opportunity for readers to send feedback to cxi@toronto.ca and enter a monthly raffle to win a \$25 gift card.

2) *Roll-out of a Housing SMS Text Message/Chatbot*

In late 2020 the City's CXi team developed and tested a SMS Text Message/Chatbot prototype so tenants could ask housing related questions via SMS (text messaging). This allows residents to navigate Toronto's rental housing landscape without needing access to the internet or a data plan. Anyone with a cell phone will be able to text the Chatbot a question and receive the appropriate information in a reply text. A formal pilot was expected in Q1 2021 but has been delayed to support Toronto Public Health to pilot the Chatbot technology for COVID-19 information.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 - Tenant Advisory Committee Members
Attachment 2 - 2021-2022 Work Plan Details