
City Council

Motion without Notice

MM2.26	ACTION			Ward: All
--------	--------	--	--	-----------

Holding Landlords Responsible for Property Maintenance and Improving Crisis Communications in Emergencies - by Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, seconded by Mayor John Tory

** This Motion has been deemed urgent by the Chair.*

** This Motion is not subject to a vote to waive referral. This Motion has been added to the agenda and is before Council for debate.*

Recommendations

Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, seconded by Mayor John Tory, recommends that:

1. City Council request the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure and Development Services to have staff review the building evaluations and audit schedule under the RentSafeTO audit program, to ensure that it includes other appropriate building and life-safety audits of all buildings in the St Jamestown catchment to ensure total building and fire compliance.
2. City Council direct the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure and Development Services to review the function and performance of the City's emergency response to the incident at 260 Wellesley Street East, in consultation with the local Councillor, the Mayor, the property owners and tenants of 260 Wellesley Street East, 650 Parliament Street, specifically as it pertains to crisis communication and emergency management for high-rise and other types of evacuations, especially for vulnerable persons, and to report the outcomes to the Executive Committee no later than 2nd Quarter of 2019.
3. City Council request the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure and Development Services to report back to the April 30, 2019 meeting of the Planning and Housing Committee on the complete schedule and expected timeline for Citywide building audits under the RentSafeTO program.
4. City Council direct the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure and Development Services, in consultation with the City Solicitor and other relevant staff, to undertake a review of the current regulatory tools available to the City, and report back as soon as practicable, with any recommendations identified as being necessary to strengthen the City's ability to respond and take action in respect to these types of incidents.

Summary

On January 22, 2019, a flood in a St. James Town building located at 260 Wellesley Street East resulted in an electrical shutdown that impacted approximately 564 apartments. Over one thousand residents were left in the dark without hydro, heat and water for five days. That night both Mayor Tory and I were personally onsite to meet with Toronto Fire, the Office of Emergency Management, representatives of the building owner and affected tenants.

The very next day, we hosted a public meeting at the Wellesley Community Centre to provide an update on the emergency and electrical restoration process to the tenants. Over 250 local residents attended the meeting with another 1500 persons watching the proceeding on Facebook Live. From these inconvenienced residents at 260 Wellesley Street East, there were also 26 tenants whom had been temporarily relocated from 650 Parliament Street, due to a similar incident that resulted in a significant fire.

During this public meeting and in subsequent communications with our office, we heard from residents about their experience and a history of maintenance neglect and tenant concerns being ignored. Tenants reported that their buildings were often left without water multiple times per month, drafty and damaged windows unrepaired, broken elevators and malfunctioning laundry equipment left for long periods of time. For these tenants, the flooding that damaged the outdated, owner-operated electrical system at 260 Wellesley Street East was not a surprise, but sadly an inevitability. The tenants had unanswered multiple questions for the building representative including inquiries about rent abatement and reimbursement for their out-of-pocket expenses as a result of the electrical shutdown.

The City of Toronto is home to approximately 3400 multi-residential buildings which are regulated under the Apartment Building bylaw. More than 50 percent of these buildings were constructed between 1951 and 1970. The potential for further incidents like this is highly likely, and represents a significant risk to the thousands of tenants in these buildings. These same tenants who have a fundamental right to a quality of life in properly maintained properties, the purpose behind the City's Apartment Building bylaw and the RentSafeTO audit program.

We are calling on the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure and Development Services to ensure that City staff review the circumstances that contributed to this incident, and consider appropriate measures, including RentSafeTO evaluations and audits, which include all other appropriate building and life-safety audits, particularly of the buildings that were built during the 1951 to 1970 timeframe. We feel that it is of critical importance to tenants, that the necessary actions are taken to ensure any non-compliance is remedied.

An outdated tenant list with incomplete contact information was provided by the property owner to the Office of Emergency Management and the local councillor. At the public meeting, the Councillor's staff hand collected tenant information about their special circumstances, such as wheelchair use and medical conditions. For tenants who required special accommodations, we forwarded their collected information to the Office of Emergency Management and property owner. The Councillor's office was the first to set up a website link to provide updates for the tenants, collect tenant information and publicly crowd-source accommodation options, and organize digital communication tools including a call hub and SMS text communications campaign for tenants to receive updates. This work was set up quickly to respond to the possible evacuation of over 1,000 residents. It's time for the City of Toronto to formalize data collection and information distribution for the purpose of crisis management and communication for life-threatening emergencies.

Background Information (City Council)

Member Motion MM2.26