

Councillor Jaye Robinson



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April 4, 2024

Planning and Housing Committee
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen Street West
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RE: PH11.4 – Zoning for Residential Basements - Preliminary Report

Dear Chair and Members of the Planning and Housing Committee,

In 2021, City Council adopted my motion requesting a strategy to address the impacts of iceberg homes, which City staff have defined as dwellings with a below grade footprint that is larger than the above grade footprint. In response to my motion, a multi-divisional working group was created, and City staff have concluded that these builds have a “greater potential to negatively impact the surrounding environment and neighbourhoods” than traditional homes, with concerns related to *Water Management, Urban Forest and Landscaping, and Built Form and Construction*.

Given their expanded footprints, most iceberg homes are subject to Minor Variance applications at the Committee of Adjustment that often cause significant local concern – particularly in ecologically sensitive areas such as TRCA-regulated lands. Accounts from other municipalities tell us that these concerns are justified. Iceberg homes in London, England have resulted in the collapse of neighbouring foundations, shifting ground levels, and have been found to create excessive noise and vibrations during excavation. As a result, certain boroughs have introduced stronger regulations and restrictions on below grade construction. In Toronto, basements are not currently regulated by the zoning by-law, aside from the building length and depth.

According to findings in the Preliminary Report, the environmental impacts of iceberg homes are worthy of our attention. City staff have identified that iceberg homes have a larger carbon footprint due to the high amount of embodied carbon in the reinforced concrete required to construct an oversized basement. It is imperative that City Council consider iceberg homes through a climate impact lens, in alignment with the Transform TO Net Zero Strategy.

Additionally, the construction of an iceberg home often necessitates the removal of many trees and extensive sub-surface development leaves little space to plant new ones. In 2021, City Council reaffirmed Toronto’s target of achieving 40% tree canopy coverage by 2050. Toronto’s urban forest plays a vital role in our climate resilience by reducing air pollution, removing stormwater runoff, and increasing carbon sequestration. In order to meet these targets, we must not only preserve mature trees in our neighbourhoods, but also ensure there is space to expand our canopy.

While City Council waits for the report back with final recommendations expected in Q4 2024, the important findings in this Preliminary Report should not be ignored.

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Your consideration is greatly appreciated.

Warm regards,

Jaye Robinson
City Councillor
Ward 15 – Don Valley West

RECOMMENDATIONS

Councillor Jaye Robinson recommends that Planning and Housing Committee:

1. Direct the Interim Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, to forward the Preliminary Report to the Director, Zoning and Secretary-Treasurer, Committee of Adjustment, to be shared with all Committee of Adjustment Members and Application Technicians;
2. Request the Interim Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, to consider as part of the Q4 report back, identifying applications for iceberg homes on Public Notices, in the Application Information Centre, Committee of Adjustment Agendas, and on application materials distributed to Committee of Adjustment Members;
3. Request the Executive Director, Environment and Climate, to include information on iceberg homes in future work on the Net Zero Buildings Strategy and other reporting, where appropriate;
4. Request the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, to apply a climate lens to the final recommendations in the report expected for Q4 2024.