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Planning and Housing Committee
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen St. W
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Using the Coliving Model to Create Housing for Students and Young Workers

**Written Deputation from Toboggan Living Inc. for the
Planning and Housing Committee PH20.7 – Toronto's
Academic Housing Strategy – Improving Housing Outcomes
for Post-Secondary Students**

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Introduction

The City of Toronto's Academic Housing Strategy is an excellent plan to address the serious issue of a lack of suitable housing for Toronto's vast student population. The focus on affordability, safety, and sustainability aligns with young people's needs and desires, and will create a well-rounded strategy for expanding housing catered to a community that is not supported in the current market. Additionally, the action items identified by this study touch on the barriers to creating suitable housing not only for students, but also young people more broadly.

To that end, Toboggan Flats has some suggestions for the City of Toronto on how to expand this strategy to ensure its long term success in supporting Toronto's young people using the coliving model. Toboggan Flats has spoken to the Planning and Housing Committee previously regarding their Office Replacement Study and the opportunity it could provide for office-to-coliving conversions. Our written deputation, [Creating Opportunities for Coliving to Thrive in Toronto](#), delves into the global success of coliving and its specific relevance to Toronto's needs.

Executive Summary

This deputation defines coliving as a form of housing with independent, secure, furnished bedrooms personal to each individual with shared access to facilities such as kitchens, laundry, and bathrooms. The coliving model is able to convert existing vacant office space into opportune downtown housing quickly, economically, and environmentally.

Toboggan Flats has identified three main pain points the Academic Housing Strategy is likely to encounter, and offers a solution for them.

1. Academic institutions are limited financially in their ability to invest in new housing developments.
2. If housing is created catering only to students, young people are stranded when they graduate, even though they are still experiencing financial insecurity.
3. Land available to develop on university and college campuses is also limited, and creating housing with models such as coliving may encounter zoning issues with the current City of Toronto's by-laws off campus.

The solution for these three issues is to expand the purview of new housing developments created under this strategy to include office-to-coliving conversions and purpose-built coliving for young workers as well as students.

1. A broader group of stakeholders will be engaged, increasing the availability of funding.
2. Adding coliving to the City of Toronto's defined Commercial Residential uses will allow more housing to be created that suits young people's needs.
3. Young people will be supported not only to complete their post-secondary education, but also to develop strong career foundations after graduation via access to housing in the downtown core.

What is Coliving?

Coliving takes many forms but generally refers to housing with independent, secure, furnished bedrooms, and a range of shared facilities (i.e. kitchens, laundry, and sometimes bathrooms). It often involves dedicated community-building staff and a flexible duration of stay.

Internationally, the average occupant age for coliving is 28 years old. Coliving appeals to newcomers without a strong social network in a city and those who want to build a sense of community. Once established, coliving adapts to different cohorts including single-parent families, remote workers, multigenerational communities, and more.

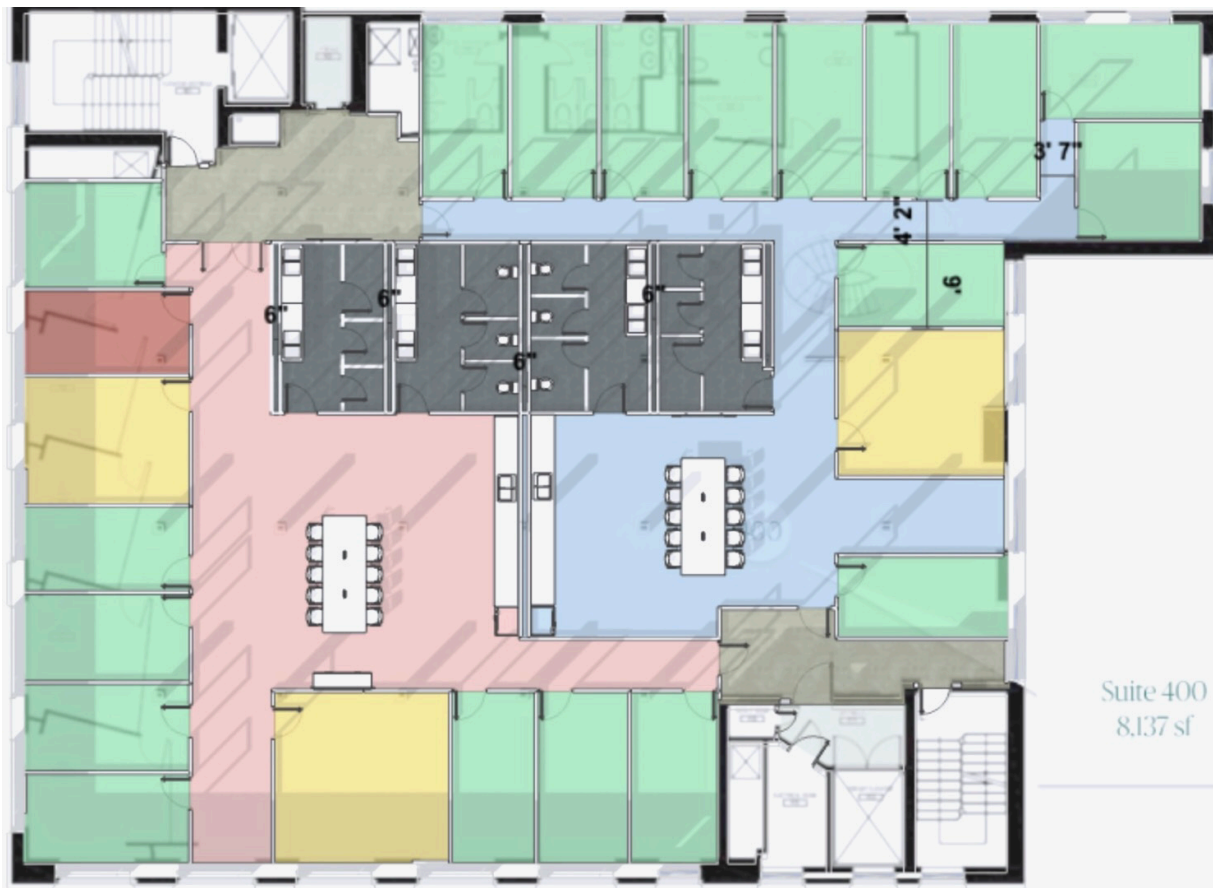
In Canada, coliving developments are common for students and seniors. Coliving could create a path of affordability for a young workforce to reestablish itself in the city. According to recent research from think-tank Youthful Cities on youth housing and coliving, 47% of Ontarian respondents between 18 and 33 are very interested in coliving in converted office buildings located downtown.

Office-to-Coliving Conversions

Recently, office-to-coliving conversions have gained attention through a groundbreaking report from the Pew Charitable Trust as a cost- and time-effective way to create high-quality housing. The [Flexible Co-living to Housing Feasibility Study](#), conducted by Pew and partner Gensler, estimates that office-to-coliving conversion build costs per unit are less than a third of build costs for new bachelor units.

At Toboggan Flats, we are working hard to bring office-to-coliving conversions to Toronto to create affordable housing downtown.

- The coliving model allows us to keep the office's mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems mostly in place by eliminating plumbing in individual suites in favour of common facilities.
- Toboggan Flats seeks out B- and C-class office space that continues a trend of increased vacancy post-COVID.
- We estimate capital expenditures of \$200–250 per sq.ft. build costs and a 9–12 month construction timeline, all within building codes.
- A sample Toboggan Flats office-to-coliving conversion floorplan can be seen below.



Relevance to the Academic Housing Strategy

As mentioned above, the coliving model would create housing downtown quickly, economically, and sustainably in a way that would appeal to students and young workers. Action item 3.2 of the strategy seeks to “explore adaptive reuse of existing buildings (such as offices and other under-utilized spaces),” of which the Toboggan Flats’ coliving model is a perfect example. Coliving conversions provide students with housing near their schools,

and young workers near the concentration of jobs in the downtown core, all in a way that is more flexible and affordable than traditional apartment rentals.

Toboggan Flats suggests that the City of Toronto explore the coliving model's potential to satisfy the requirements of their Academic Housing Strategy.

Suggestions for Implementation of the Academic Housing Strategy

From our experience in creating housing for young people, we have identified three main pain points that this strategy is likely to experience when implemented.

Limitations of Academic Institutions

Firstly, academic institutions are limited in their ability to invest in new housing development projects. The Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario, and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce released an [open letter](#) to the provincial government in March, stating an "urgent need" for strategic investment in Ontario's post-secondary institutions. For new affordable housing developments to succeed in creating the necessary infrastructure to support Toronto's student community, more stakeholders need to be engaged in order to secure the additional funding that academic institutions cannot cover. Expanding the purview of housing developments created from this strategy to include not only students, but also young people under the age of 30 would engage organizations for potential partnerships who have a greater ability to provide funding than academic institutions currently do.

In addition to their financial limitations, as more housing is created, space available on university and college campuses will quickly reach capacity. In working to get new coliving developments off the ground, the main problem we encounter is that coliving may not fit into the city's defined zoning uses if not within the context of student housing on campus. Creating a definition of coliving as a use for a Commercial Residential zone will allow for the creation of this type of housing for students and young workers alike with far less constraints.

Housing Insecurity for Graduates and other Young Workers

We mention young workers in relation to this strategy because the problem of a lack of suitable, affordable housing resurfaces for young people immediately after graduation if they have been relying on student housing to meet their needs. New graduates entering the

workforce full-time are burdened with loans, and will be making entry-level salaries compared to their older, more experienced peers.

A survey conducted by Youthful Cities found that “25% of youth surveyed identified as either unemployed or underemployed, while 25% were looking to switch industries within the next five years. Among these youth, rates of self reported mental distress and depression were up to 15% greater, representing a significant mental wellbeing impact of career instability.”

This strained financial situation often prices young people out of downtown, removing them from areas where the most jobs are available. Lengthy and expensive commutes strain young people’s finances and mental health even further.

Students and young workers face the same housing challenges. Toboggan Flats urges this committee to build on the action items of this strategy to improve the accessibility of housing developments for all young people. Exploring adaptive reuse of existing buildings, updating zoning by-laws to accept the coliving model beyond the use of student housing, and continuing to engage the community to discover their needs will set this strategy, and therefore young people, up for success in their academic endeavors and beyond.

Conclusion

The Academic Housing Strategy is a strong step toward supporting the success of young people in Toronto. It comprehensively addresses the needs and priorities of the diverse student community and provides actionable solutions to their struggles. The fundamentals of the strategy outlined can be a framework to support not only students, but young people in their journey past education into the workforce.

Toboggan Flats asks the Planning and Housing Committee to consider the needs of young people as a broader community, and the benefits of including them as a target demographic of new developments created from this strategy.

Holistically updating the City’s priorities and regulations for creating non-traditional types of housing as a result of this project will set up the city and its people for long-term success.

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