

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Overview

Southern Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe contains some 2,000 post-war high-rise towers arranged in several hundred apartment neighbourhoods across the region (Stewart and Thorne, 2010). Developed during an ambitious period of post-war growth, these towers are a fundamental part of the region's housing stock and create an urban form that is unique on the continent. At their best, they made good on their intended design as self-sufficient, master-planned communities. However, in recent decades these neighbourhoods have faced many challenges.

Recent research has uncovered two trends. The first is that apartment neighbourhoods have undeniably fallen behind. As described in *Poverty by Postal Code 2: Vertical Poverty*, the gradual decline of these neighbourhoods has transformed them into emerging centres of poverty (United Way, 2010). These neighbourhoods are home to thousands of people, yet they lack many of the hallmarks of today's notion of "complete communities" (Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure, Growth Secretariat, 2006), including access to fresh food; opportunities for entrepreneurs and social enterprise; employment; and many of the facilities and services fundamental to families, such as childcare.

Secondly, research has shown that apartment neighbourhoods have all the basic ingredients to evolve into complete, healthy and prosperous places. A series of recent studies, including the report *Tower Neighbourhood Renewal in the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (Stewart and Thorne, 2010), developed for the Ministry of Infrastructure, Province of Ontario, and the forthcoming *Toward Healthy Apartment Neighbourhoods* prepared for Toronto Public Health, have found that apartment neighbourhoods contain the density, diversity, and existing assets to support vibrant local economies and community infrastructure. As a result, there is every reason to believe in their potential to rise again as dynamic and self-sufficient neighbourhoods in their own right.

As other studies focusing on Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods have shown, similar urban zones throughout the world have successfully made this transformation and are now thriving, a renewal fuelled by a combination of reinvestment and revitalization efforts. In particular, formerly stagnant tower neighbourhoods have developed an active culture of small business, local retail, social enterprise and community infrastructure. Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods, on the other hand, have not had the same level of investment or attention and, as a result, continue to fall behind.

This study looks at why Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods have so little of the flexibility and dynamism found in other jurisdictions. What is preventing constructive social and commercial investment, and what are potential actions for change?

This study was commissioned in 2011 by United Way Toronto as a follow up to *Vertical Poverty*. It aims to foster a conversation on the great potential of the region's apartment neighbourhoods, the barriers to achieving that potential and possible action for removing them.

Towards a Solution: Closing the gap between policy and potential

Public policy supports the creation of strong neighbourhoods and complete communities throughout the region, but strict zoning codes are one factor preventing apartment districts from achieving these goals. The current zoning framework often prohibits the introduction of new uses, or any deviation from the existing neighbourhood form, due to what can be called "shrink-wrap zoning."

The "legacy" zoning by-laws from the 1960s and 70s that still govern land use in Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods severely limit potential changes and are hampering reinvestment. However, there are practical solutions.

Building on the history of pro-active planning in the City of Toronto, it's time to examine a modern and flexible zoning framework that supports these priority areas in reaching their full economic and social potential.

Many of Toronto's older high-rise neighbourhoods are not receiving their fair share of local investment, services and employment, despite their diverse populations and central locations in a prosperous city and urban region. While our city's avenues, transit corridors, downtown "Kings" neighbourhoods and central waterfront are benefiting from policy shifts in support of revitalization, many apartment neighbourhoods continue to face complex and rigorous zoning barriers to positive interventions both small and large.

It should be stated that barriers to investment in apartment neighbourhoods are not solely limited to, nor the principal responsibility of, the existing zoning framework. A multitude of socio-economic, demographic, real estate capital market, site constraints, and other forces, shape and influence the viability of investment in all communities.

This study does not seek to place unfair blame on a complex and longstanding zoning framework. Nor does it suggest that a zoning



solution alone is the answer to revitalizing communities. Rather, the study seeks to identify those barriers to investment that are within the jurisdiction of municipal planning policy and recommend possible tools to eliminate or reduce their constraints on apartment neighbourhoods. The report aims to close the gap between policy and potential.

The following is an initial investigation of potential alternatives to the current zoning framework. This proposal contemplates a 'tiered' approach of varying degrees of permissiveness.

Within this proposed tiered zoning framework, the first tier focusses on broadening land use permissions to enable a wide range of community, commercial and institutional activities. Tier 1 also proposes to reduce barriers to minor building alterations. This tier is envisioned to be broadly applicable across most or all apartment neighbourhoods in the city. The second tier would expand on this to permit as-of-right changes to the physical form of the building or property in order to accommodate modest additions or small buildings to house new uses. Tier 3 is intended to support more significant changes, such as new mixed-use infill development, and is therefore envisioned to apply only to select apartment neighbourhoods in the city.

This policy options discussed in this report are meant for the purposes of framing a broader discussion for the development of implementable recommendations for the creation of new policy tools that will help enable Toronto's many hundred apartment neighbourhoods emerge as more vibrant, prosperous and 'complete' communities throughout the City and region.

Images:

Opposite, Top: Typical apartment property, Toronto, 2006.
Opposite, Middle: Community centre addition at base of apartment tower, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009.
Opposite, Bottom: Fruit market in apartment neighbourhoods, Melbourne Australia, 2012. In most apartment neighbourhoods in Toronto, such a market or building additions would be against the current zoning by-law.
Below: Typical apartment neighbourhood and new mixed-use development, including older and newer high-rise buildings, Mississauga, Ontario, 2010.



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