

Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods

Executive Summary

This report considers how Toronto's several hundred clusters of post-war high-rise apartment buildings – referred to in this report as apartment neighbourhoods – can better support the health of apartment residents and of the residents in the surrounding communities through a series of site specific strategies. Concurrently, it identifies land use regulations that may limit these strategies, through constraining building form and limiting land use mixes, thereby preventing apartment neighbourhoods across the city emerging as economically vibrant, well-served and healthy communities.

As has been demonstrated in numerous studies by the United Way, Toronto Public Health, Wellesley Institute, and St. Michael's Hospital among others, Toronto's inner suburbs are areas where growing poverty has been linked to poor health outcomes. These trends have been found to be acute within older high-rise apartment neighbourhoods in these areas of the city, and are increasingly home to new Canadians, young children, and the elderly. The aim of this study is to expand on research related to citywide health and illustrate how public health objectives can be achieved through design interventions directed at Toronto's most vulnerable populations, where they are concentrated in apartment neighbourhoods. It is hoped that these design interventions can be used as tools that can be applied to apartment neighbourhoods across the City.

This report is based on the notion that healthy cities are cities that are liveable, prosperous and sustainable; that they have high quality built and natural environments; that they provide for the needs of their population in an equitable and sustainable fashion; that they support and foster health and well-being. This report articulates the view that healthy cities don't just happen; that they result from creative vision, strategic decision-making, and thoughtful implementation that reflects the needs and the challenges of all of its residents.

While apartment neighbourhoods face many challenges, they have attributes that make them amenable to healthy changes. They have the high density and diverse populations needed to support local retail businesses and institutions, community amenities and services that would make them more complete and healthy communities. They also have large and often under used open areas providing the space and flexibility to accommodate positive physical, social and economic improvements. While today, many of these activities are hampered by existing zoning regulations, the aim of this report is to assess opportunities for healthier neighbourhoods, as well as identify existing policies and regulations hampering these efforts.

To assess the opportunities of apartment neighbourhoods, this report utilizes the following themes, identified in the Toronto Public Health report *Healthy Toronto by Design*, 2011, and applies them to the scale of the apartment neighbourhood:

1. Natural Environment
2. Built Environment
3. Transportation
4. Housing
5. Income and Employment
6. Education and Learning
7. Food Security
8. Community Health

Using these health themes, thirty-one strategies and design opportunities have been developed that together form a strategic direction to enable positive neighbourhood change, and inform investment into these communities moving forward.

This report presents a range of strategies, both large and small, short and long term, that could be applied to Toronto's numerous apartment neighbourhoods to help them emerge as vibrant and healthy places. These strategies have the potential to improve the

Images:

Opposite, left: Don Mills and DVP, 2006, courtesy Brendan Martin

Opposite, top right: Market in apartment neighbourhood, Berlin, Germany, 2009

Opposite, middle right: Public square near older and newer apartment housing, Port Credit, Mississauga, 2010

Opposite, bottom right: Outdoor fresh food market, St. Jamestown, Toronto, courtesy of TRO

Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods: A Healthy Toronto by Design Report

health outcomes and well being of hundreds of thousands of residents who call these areas home. They could also enable apartment neighbourhoods to emerge as community focal points providing social exchange and convenient access to shops and services to adjacent communities and the City of Toronto as a whole.

As with all areas of the city, Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods are complex and diverse. Planning regulations are by no means the sole barrier to reinvestment and revitalization in apartment neighbourhoods in Toronto's inner suburbs. There is no panacea for achieving the opportunities outlined in this report. Rather, progress will be made through a series of incremental and related strategies for the short and long terms. Realizing these opportunities requires the combination of enabling policies, and means of supporting individual and coordinated private, non-profit and public sectors investment towards these ends.

This report does however identify the relationship between the urban planning framework and proposed solutions, specifically with respect to the City's Official Plan and Zoning By-Law as they relate to the strategies presented here for positive neighbourhood change. While many policies are enabling, particularly those of the Official Plan, there are many regulatory barriers, both in the City's Zoning By-law and other municipal regulations. Identifying and removing the barriers in the urban planning framework is a first and crucial step in enabling the strategic direction outlined in this report.

Achieving many of the strategies outlined in this report are relatively straightforward. Others are more complicated. Together, they will help to inform the evolution of these dynamic, diverse and vibrant communities throughout Toronto in the decades to come. As policies are strengthened and capacity builds, the number, sophistication and efficacy of initiatives can grow over time.

