

Dwelling Room Preservation Policy Action Initiative

Background

Like many other North American cities, Toronto is experiencing a long-standing trend of dwelling room loss. This is both due to increasing development pressures and inadequate public policy for dwelling room protection and preservation. For example, dwelling rooms are not currently protected under the City's Rental Housing Protection By-law and Toronto lacks adequate funding programs to support the preservation of dwelling rooms and SROs by non-profit housing organizations.

A [review of how other municipalities have addressed the problem of dwelling room loss](#) by researcher Emily Paradis, shows that comprehensive frameworks of policies and programs which include a combination of regulations that put restrictions on the conversion, demolition, and renovation of rooming houses; funded programs that facilitate the transfer of ownership of private rooming houses to non-profits; and support for tenant education and advocacy, have proven an effective method slowing the loss of dwelling rooms in Montreal, Vancouver, Chicago and San Francisco. Importantly, Paradis' research highlights the critical role that ongoing community advocacy plays in the adoption and implementation of these comprehensive approaches, and in ensuring these frameworks are regularly evaluated and are responsive to changing conditions and new information.

The Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT) has been working on the issue of dwelling room loss for several years in Parkdale. The 2017 [Parkdale Rooming House Study](#) has led to PNLT pursuing action in four areas: 1) eviction prevention & response, 2) preservation through acquisition & rehabilitation, 3) new affordable housing development, and 4) policy advocacy. PNLT, in partnership with Woodgreen, Parkdale Community Legal Services, and PARC, is currently piloting elements of a Parkdale Rooming House Stabilization, Eviction Prevention and Preservation Strategy, a replicable model that aims to prevent homelessness through effectively addressing the problem of the loss of rooming houses and bachelorettes in Parkdale.

The Initiative

As part of its policy advocacy efforts, the collaborating agencies of the Rooming House Strategy have been developing a strategy to ensure the City implements a robust regulatory & program framework for dwelling room and tenant protection, similar to other North American cities. The group has received funding from the Maytree Foundation to hire a policy researcher and organizer until December, 2019.

The purpose of the initiative is to mobilize community stakeholders to collaboratively develop, and work to have implemented, a comprehensive policy & program framework to address dwelling room loss.

The goals of the framework:

- To prevent dwelling room loss through conversion, demolition and renovation across Toronto
- To preserve Toronto's affordable housing supply
- To improve housing quality/conditions of Toronto's rooming houses
- To protect & support tenants (rental affordability, unit/building condition, no displacement, re-housing/relocation, mitigate impact of displacement/rehousing, prevent harassment & manipulation, prevent homelessness)

Goals of the Initiative:

By the end of 2019:

- The need for a framework has been accepted and adopted by politicians and policy-makers and embedded in municipal housing policies/plans
- The initial components of a comprehensive framework of policy and programs that we want to advocate for have been identified and developed into proposals by the working group
- Some proposals are in the process of being adopted or implemented
- Some proposals are being advocated for
- Clear advocacy objectives have been set for 2020 and beyond
- Relationships among rooming house stakeholders are strengthened
- Relationships between stakeholders and policy-makers is improved
- Stakeholder capacity to engage with policy-making process is improved

Strategy

Working from the understanding that there are so many groups, so many meetings, and so little time, the structure of this initiative (an alternative to a more conventional and democratic working group structure) is being proposed as a pragmatic solution to the challenge of pursuing community-developed policy and policy advocacy at a time when resources and capacity across the housing sector are quite strained.

To enable broad participation while addressing time and capacity constraints, the strategy involves three different ways that people and organizations can contribute to this effort:

1. Working Group

Working Group Purpose:

To mobilize and concentrate the energies of community stakeholders from across the city on the development and adoption/implementation of an effective framework of policies & programs that will:

1. be effective in preventing dwelling room loss and protecting dwelling room tenants in Toronto;
2. be informed by stakeholder experience; and
3. complement--and not conflict with--the efforts of others working to promote tenant rights, housing affordability, and dwelling room legalization.

Working Group Goals:

1. Develop basic framework structure of policy & programs to pursue in Toronto
2. Prioritize pieces of that framework for immediate development
3. Workshop pieces of that framework into fully-formed evidence/experience-based proposals that address the needs and interests of all stakeholders
4. Develop and implement strategies for the adoption & implementation of new policy & programs (including a campaign to have the need for a framework accepted & adopted by politicians & policy-makers)
5. Keep allies informed of the activities/progress of the working group & of opportunities to contribute.

Working Group Structure & Membership:

Membership:

- **A core group of people committed to coming prepared to monthly meetings to share their unique perspectives and contribute meaningfully to meeting the goals of the working group**
- **Limited to about 20 people, representing the following stakeholder groups:**
 - **Dwelling room tenants (5):** Current and former dwelling room tenants.
 - **Non-profit housing providers & operators (5):** Currently operating dwelling rooms, currently providing services to tenants in dwelling rooms, interested in acquiring or owning dwelling rooms, interested in operating dwelling rooms.
 - **Tenant advocates (5):** Experience working with and/or advocating for dwelling room tenants.
 - **Housing policy people (5):** Experience drafting and implementing housing policy, research and/or operational knowledge of dwelling room policy, etc.
 - **Plus: Working group coordinator & facilitator: *Melissa Goldstein, PNLT***
 - *People who can also contribute perspectives shaped by their experience of indigeneity and/or other marginalized identities are encouraged to join.*

Format:

- **Monthly highly-structured workshop-style meetings focused on specific topics/pieces of the framework, with clear goals for each meeting.**
 - All Working Group members are welcome at all meetings/workshops, with input sought specifically in each meeting/workshop from people with particular experience most relevant to the piece of the framework being worked on at the meeting/workshop.
 - Resource Group members will be invited to attend on an as-needed basis
- **Working group coordinator & facilitator:**
 - Organizes and coordinates meetings/workshops; sets agenda; invites participants; facilitates meetings/workshops
 - Supports meetings/workshops with policy research & development, monitoring policy & political environment, and identifying opportunities for action. Research can include additional meetings/discussions with members of the group, policy-makers, experts, etc.

- Communication (internal working group communication & Resource Group, and Engaged Ally communication) & campaign coordination.

The working group will be guided by the following principles:

- Tenant involvement should be centred in the policy development process;
- People's time should be used well and strategically--no meetings for no reason;
- People's productivity should be maximized;
- Collaboration should be prioritized;
- Good policy comes from the involvement of people with first-hand experience of the issue;
- Building participants' capacity to enable their meaningful participation should be prioritized;
- Critical, constructive feedback is welcome and will be seriously considered;
- Transparent and effective communication is essential;
- Consensus-based decision-making is the goal*

**the Steering Committee of the PNLT/Woodgreen/PCLS/PARC collaboration, which initiated this project, will hold ultimate decision-making authority over major decisions about asks & direction.*

2. Resource Group

Resource Group Purpose:

- **To contribute knowledge, experience, expertise, and/or skills to supporting the efforts of the working group; and to contribute to advancing the goals of the initiative.**

Membership: Open

Resource Group Responsibilities/Role:

- **Keep up with efforts of working group**
- **Contribute on an as-needed basis to the efforts of the working group:** this could be through participating in meetings of the working group, through separate meetings with working group coordinator, etc.
- **Provide feedback on efforts of working group**
- **Participate in ongoing advocacy (as appropriate)**

(this group is particularly suited to City staff, Councillors & political staff, and others who have specific knowledge or expertise to contribute...especially those with limited availability.)

3. Engaged Allies

Engaged Allies Purpose:

- **To contribute to advancing the goals of the initiative**

Membership: Open

Engaged Allies Responsibilities/Role:

- **Follow efforts of working group**
- **Participate in ongoing advocacy (as appropriate)**

(This group is suited to anyone interested in the issue and wants to help us convince the city to move forward with a comprehensive framework approach to addressing dwelling room loss and help us move these policy proposals forward as they're developed.)

Framework Component Areas: What we'll be working on.

1. Rooming House Preservation & Acquisition

- **Goal:** Preserve use & protect affordable housing supply, stabilize housing, improve housing quality/conditions, and better protect tenants (improve housing security, affordability, unit condition, and prevent harassment & manipulation)

Possible Components:

- Non-profit acquisition & rehabilitation program
- Small Site Affordable Housing Acquisition Fund
- Implementation of low-barrier model in non-profit rooming houses to prevent displacement

2. Dwelling room preservation & replacement policies

- **Goal:** Prevent dwelling room conversion and demolition, preserve affordable housing supply, encourage/support transfer of dwelling room buildings to public and/or non-profit ownership, ensure transferred/acquired dwelling room buildings remain affordable, improve housing quality/conditions, protect & support tenants (rental affordability, unit/building condition, no displacement, re-housing/re-location, mitigate impact of displacement/rehousing, prevent harassment & manipulation)

Possible Components:

- Official Plan Amendment to replace dwelling rooms lost to development & support affected tenants
- Expansion of Residential Rental Property Demolition and Conversion Control By-law, to replace dwelling rooms lost to conversion (need large penalties for unauthorized conversions or sales)
- Large penalties for holding buildings or units vacant, improper evictions, and other violations of City regulations
- Policies & funding to facilitate development of new deeply affordable housing

3. Tenant support & protection

- **Goal:** Preserve rental affordability, ensure adequate unit/building condition, prevent displacement, ensure re-housing/relocation & prevent homelessness, mitigate impact of displacement/rehousing, prevent harassment & manipulation

Possible Components:

- Proactive eviction prevention & response (including support for tenant organizing)

4. Data collection

- **Goal:** To ensure framework is data-driven, that there is adequate data available to build, implement/enforce, and monitor/evaluate effectiveness of framework, and to inform improvements

Possible components:

- An affordable housing data strategy for the City to allow it to track and respond to changes in housing affordability over time, and monitor impact of policies (including impact on equity-seeking groups) based on regularly-updated, reliable data
- Data tools to empower tenants and tenant advocates to prevent dwelling room loss and displacement and enforce rights

5. Ongoing community action

- Tenants and community organizations experience the direct consequences of the real estate speculation & financialization that fuels dwelling room loss. A critical component of preventing dwelling room loss is ongoing community-based knowledge and action to identify the impacts of these trends as they emerge and to hold private actors and policy-makers accountable through direct action, public campaigns, tenant organizing, and the development of new models.

For more information about this initiative, contact Melissa Goldstein at pnlt@parc.on.ca