



# Toronto's Residential Apartment Commercial Zone



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**T**he City of Toronto (City) has more high-rise apartment towers than any North American city besides New York City. Currently, there are over 1,000 residential apartment towers in Toronto, many of which serve low-income households and newcomer families in the city's suburbs. Constructed between the 1950s and 1980s, the City has zoned the majority of these towers for "residential use only," making it difficult for residents to access necessary shops and services without public transit or the use of a car.

In 2014, Toronto City Council approved the Residential Apartment Commercial (RAC) zone as part of ongoing efforts to revitalize tower communities. Once implemented, the new zone will facilitate tower revitalization efforts by permitting a number of small-scale commercial and community uses within apartment towers across the city. This policy story explores how the RAC zone came to be, its implications for health, and lessons learned through the zoning change process.

## Development of the Residential Apartment Commercial Zone: Reducing Barriers to Community Wellbeing and Revitalization

**H**ousing is widely recognized as a key determinant of health. Linked to income-related factors, poor housing conditions have negative health implications, such as increased risk of chronic disease and poor mental health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010).

**The zoning rules made good sense back then, but as things evolve and communities change...those zoning rules then inhibit what needs to happen and it can be difficult to be able to make the necessary changes quickly.**

*Brian Cook, Health Research Strategist  
Toronto Public Health*

In Toronto, high-rise apartment towers are increasingly becoming sites of poverty, most notably within Toronto's inner-suburbs (MacDonnell, 2011). According to a 2011 Toronto United Way Report, the number of low-income families living in apartment towers in the City has increased from 34% in 1981 to 43% in 2001 (MacDonnell, 2011, p. 34). Further, many of these apartment towers are aging, in need of major repairs, and experience issues such as lack of common and recreational space (MacDonnell, 2011).

Adding to the above challenges, the legacy of zoning in Toronto is such that existing bylaws do not permit non-residential uses in many of the city's apartment towers. While some apartment communities have access to retail services, the majority are limited to small tuck shops, which are "strictly controlled with respect to their size and their ability to reach a market beyond the building's residents (CUG+R, 2012)." As a result, many residents of tower communities have limited access to services and recreational opportunities without use the of a car or public transit.

Development of the new RAC zone promises to increase access to community services and support revitalization initiatives in tower communities by permitting a number of small-scale commercial and community uses on the first floor of many apartment towers across the city. From a health perspective, this zoning change has the potential to contribute to community wellbeing by enabling residents to

access more services within their communities, such as healthy corner stores, community services, recreational classes, and fresh food markets. When services are close by, residents may also be more likely to walk to their destination instead of taking a bus or car.

In supporting community revitalization initiatives, the new zone could also have broader implications for community wellbeing by helping to strengthen community ties and reduce social isolation. As Jane Welsh, Project Manager for Environmental Planning with Toronto's City Planning Division, reflects, "by providing services and commercial goods where they are needed, it removes a sense of isolation and creates more of a feeling of community."

### **An Idea and the Partners to Make it Happen**

**T**he Tower Renewal Program is a permanent program of the City's Tower and Neighbourhoods Revitalization Unit, which aims to drive broad environmental, social, and cultural change by improving Toronto's concrete towers and surrounding neighbourhoods (The City of Toronto, 2016). Formed in 2008, the Program has cultivated a strong history of working with partners interested in and knowledgeable about the City's tower renewal, including the City Planning Division, ERA Architect's Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal, the United Way, and Toronto Public Health. Since its establishment,

partners have worked on numerous collaborative initiatives, such as research and reports.

In 2011, the City was in the process of harmonizing former municipal zoning bylaws into one new city zoning bylaw. Together, the above partners collaborated to formulate the initial concept for the new zone, spurred by their ongoing collaborative relationship and ideas from individuals internal and external to the City. The new city-wide zoning by-law provided a window of opportunity for the City to move forward with the RAC zone.

With a strong collaborative in place and the right timing, partners began working together on a long-term basis to develop the idea for the new zone and to employ a variety of strategies to generate the external and internal support needed to make change happen. Examples of strategies include:

### *1. Research and analysis:*

Partners published a number of reports and studies on tower renewal. For example, Toronto United Way published a report on Vertical Poverty, which highlighted the need for greater access to services in Tower Neighbourhoods. The Center for Urban Growth and Renewal also produced a series of high quality reports on the state of apartment towers in the city. A number of these reports outlined the negative health impacts of the aging

tower communities and the current zoning structure, as well as the need for tower revitalization to improve community wellbeing.

### *2. Engaging champions:*

Work closely with internal champions and partners, such as city planners, who were supportive of the new zone. These stakeholders provided important advice on internal processes, technical issues, and the types of actions that could help move the project forward.

### *3. Leveraging partner support:*

Having prominent partners on board, such as the Toronto United Way, helped make it easier to engage and seek buy-in from city council and other key stakeholders. Having multiple partners involved also meant that individual partners could make small contributions, which collectively resulted in significant impacts.

**Whenever there's a project like this, that's interdisciplinary and involves major regulatory change, it can be very daunting. But when you have a lot of different players who are all interested and willing to put their various resources into it at different stages, you end up with really good energy. People can see that if they make a small or medium sized contribution they can have a big impact, as**

*Elise Hug, former Project Manager at the City of Toronto Tower Renewal Office*

#### 4. *Establishing media presence and using creative communication :*

Establishing a media presence and working to keep the issue in the media (e.g. highlighting new reports) was another important strategy for generating support. In communicating the issue to the public and decision-makers, partners also had the opportunity to get creative. For example, ERA, the United Way and others worked with the National Film Board to create a series of videos and a website called the *One Millionth Tower*. This website highlighted the reality of living in the tower neighborhoods and used visuals to show what community revitalization could look like under the new zone.

Overall, it took significant time and energy to establish the buy-in required to move forward with development of the RAC zone. However, the combination of internal and external support that was established proved effective. Having secured the necessary political will, in 2012 the Planning and Growth Management Committee passed a motion authorizing the City Planning Division to work with the Tower Renewal Office, the United Way, Toronto Public Health, and other partners to develop the new RAC zone, as well as to determine the city neighbourhoods that were best suited to its application.

#### Formulating the New Zone

Once Toronto City Council passed the motion in 2012, a working group was established to help determine permissions for the zone. Toronto City Council then adopted the new regulations a year later as part of the citywide zoning bylaw approved by Council. The new zone, however, was not applied to sites right away. From there, the same group of stakeholders engaged in a process to determine the sites where the zone should be applied. This involved establishing a set of criteria, key to which was prioritizing the application of the new zone in low-income communities.



Toronto, Ontario; Flickr

After the new zone was formulated and sites had been established, the project received permission to consult with communities. This community consultation process for the new zone was novel, as the partners went directly into the communities and presented at community hubs in contrast to traditional locations such as civic centers. Further, it wasn't just the City Planning Division involved in the consultation process, but also community partners, such as the United Way. As Jane Welsh reflects, this level of community consultation was important considering that "to actually make it work, you can't just change the rules, you also have to invest in engagement with the community."

After the consultation process and almost two years of effort, Toronto City Council approved the RAC zone in June 2014. However, adding a layer of complexity, the citywide zoning bylaw, which contains the RAC zone, is currently under appeal by the Ontario Municipal Board, delaying the zone's implementation.



Toronto 3D sign; Flickr

## Overcoming Challenges of Complexity

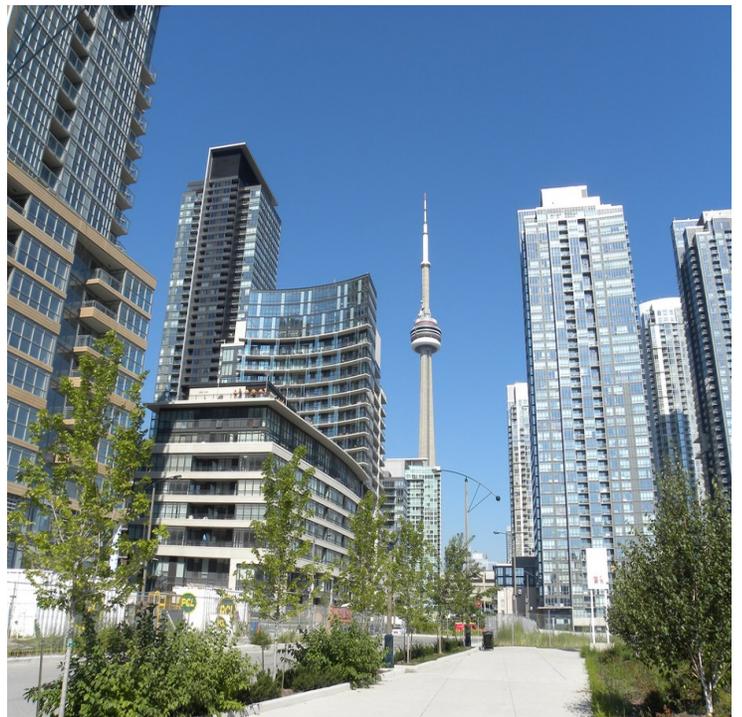
**F**ormulation and development of the new zone was relatively fast when compared to the usual time it takes to create a new zone. With that said, it did involve overcoming a number of barriers. For instance, navigating the complexity of zoning regulations in Toronto was a major challenge, which took significant time and required jumping through multiple hoops. An important factor in overcoming this challenge was bringing together diverse partners who had a range of expertise and who were able to put in the necessary resources at different stages of the project.

Another challenge the project had to overcome during the formulation of the RAC zone was unease over unknowns and the impact that new uses might have on residents in the towers. Some effort from partners was required to address this unease, and to illustrate the merits of allowing property owners to decide what should or should not be in the buildings, within a framework of generally acceptable uses. Having internal champions on board who understood the new zone and could help push the project along, such as the Director of Public Health, helped to overcome such roadblocks.

## Preparing for Implementation

**A**spects of the City's new city-wide zoning bylaw could be under appeal for a number of years. However, those involved in the RAC's development are hopeful that most of the city-wide zoning bylaw will soon come into effect, including the RAC zone component. With this in mind, partners are by no means standing still while awaiting approval, but are actively planning for implementation. The Tower Renewal Program, for example, has been busy developing tools to help make implementation easier and more efficient for those who will be impacted by the new zone. The Program is also engaging communities in consultations to explore resident and property owner perspectives on implementation with the goal of generating interest, collecting feedback, and maintaining momentum around the new zone.

Once the new zone is approved, the next challenge will be making change happen in the tower communities. As Silvia Fraser, manager of the Tower and Neighbourhood Revitalization Unit, states, the zoning change “will mean nothing if [implementation] doesn't get realized.” Nevertheless, the work the partners have done upfront to engage and prepare communities will be an important asset in overcoming the challenges ahead.



Tower block in Toronto, Ontario; Flickr

# Key Lessons



- ◆ **Engaging Champions and Key Partners:** It starts with getting partners and champions in the room who have the right attitude, who are passionate about making things happen, and who have the patience for what may be a long-term path.
- ◆ **Understand Community Needs:** Thoroughly understand community needs before coming up with a vision for why you are making the proposed change.
- ◆ **Recruit a Diverse Team:** It is important to have diverse partners involved, as well as access to different resources to support research and communications initiatives. In the case of the RAC zone, limited resources would have made it difficult for partners to propose a major regulatory change, like the change in zone.
- ◆ **Formulate a Plan:** Once your team is established, seek clarity as soon as you can about what you're driving towards and come up with a diversity of strategies to move that forward.
- ◆ **Employ Internal and External Strategies:** Work over the long-term to employ a toolkit of strategies, both internal and external to the jurisdiction, to generate public support and decision-maker buy-in.
- ◆ **Get Creative:** Think creatively and put together effective communication material, such as media friendly reports or multi-media. This will help to position the partnership team as a credible source.



Toronto skyline; Wikimedia



## Follow the Links to Learn More

[ERA Architects, Tower Renewal](#)

[The City of Toronto's Tower Renewal Program](#)

[The National Film Board, One Millionth Tower](#)

[Research and Reports, United Way Toronto & York Region](#)

[The Healthy Corner Stores Project, City of Toronto](#)

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