



Parkdale's Recovery, Rebuild, and Transformation

Summary Report for the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild - July 31, 2020

The Parkdale People's Economy, a network of over 30 community-based organizations and hundreds of community members in Parkdale, has been supporting Social Planning Toronto and Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) in engaging community members in Parkdale to build recommendations for the City of Toronto's Recovery and Rebuild process. We know that many of our neighbours are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to housing insecurity, mental health, poverty, precarious work, and lack of access to affordable food and resources, and wanted to build an understanding of how community members have been coping during these difficult times and how they envision change moving forward.

During the week of July 13th, the Parkdale People's Economy engaged a total of 86 community members representing a unique cross-section of the neighbourhood: approximately 60% of our respondents are racialized, with 12.2% identifying as Indigenous and 13.5% identifying as Black; over two-thirds of our respondents are low-income (\$0-\$29,999 per year); and over a quarter do not have a fixed address. Through the leadership of community members, we conducted community-led consultations with members of the Tamil and Filipinx communities, smaller scale story circles with members of the Milky Way Garden and people living in encampments, and one-on-one survey support with individuals across the neighbourhood. The following submission to the City of Toronto is not a comprehensive reflection of the neighbourhood, but represents the voices of community members who are often systematically erased from engagement processes. Therefore, this submission should be weighed accordingly, as it represents the needs and voices of those who have been intentionally left out of planning processes and who are calling for urgent and fundamental changes to policy. Namely, the call to never return to a 'normal' determined by austerity, neoliberalism, and the continued legacies of settler colonialism and slavery. The City of Toronto has a responsibility to respond to these recommendations to enhance the participation and inclusion of marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

The following summary report will focus on three core themes from community members on challenges, creative solutions, and resilience in rebuilding the City and supporting community members during COVID-19: (1) housing justice; (2) income and employment supports; and (3) mental health and harm reduction. We also provide a set of suggestions for the City of Toronto to build an equitable process for planning towards recovery and rebuild. The results drawn from our neighbourhood-based consultations will inform a wider community-based planning process in

Parkdale to address emergency responses, mid-term recovery and rebuild, and long-term visions for transformation in the Parkdale neighbourhood.

1. Housing Justice as a Core Principle for Recovery, Rebuild, and Transformation

The most common and pressing theme repeated throughout our consultations is the urgent need for permanent, safe, and affordable housing for all. Housing was recognized as a key source of safety and wellbeing during the pandemic, and community members called on the City of Toronto, Province of Ontario, the Federal Government, and grassroots groups to uphold the following commitments:

- Invest in the **preservation and expansion** of deeply affordable units, supportive housing, transitional housing, cooperative housing, social housing, and shelters in the Parkdale neighbourhood to ensure that people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness can stay within their community and access local services.
- Implement **rent control, stronger housing policies, and protection of tenant rights** in order to prevent and reduce the harm and threats to social health of economic displacement, such as the destructive impact Bill 184 will have on our community.
- **Halt evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic** towards tenants or members of encampments, and waive the rents of tenants who missed payments during COVID-19.
- Enforce stricter guidelines on landlords to conduct **maintenance of units and sanitation of buildings** without displacement or above-guideline rent increases to ensure that living conditions are decent and healthy.
- Support the **decommodification of housing and investments in community land trusts** to expand community ownership of land, guided by the leadership of Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities and people with lived experience of poverty and housing insecurity in the neighbourhood.
- Mandate the incorporation of **30-50% affordable housing in new developments** through community benefits and inclusionary zoning to ensure no displacement, and **redefine ‘affordable housing’** from Average Market Rent to Rent Geared To Income.
- Reclaim **vacant units and properties** for the creation of affordable housing.

These recommendations aim to ensure stable, sustainable, and secure housing in the neighbourhood and in the City at large.¹

¹ The City of Toronto’s [HousingTO: 2020-2030 Action Plan](#)’s mission statement reflects the recommendations in this consultation, “To provide Torontonians with housing that is safe, affordable and suitable to their needs,” (p. 9). At least four key strategic actions in the plan align with recommendations from the consultation, including “Prevent Homelessness and Improve Pathways to Housing Stability,” “Maintain and Increase Access to Affordable Rents,” “Ensure Well-Maintained and Secure Homes for Renters,” “Create New Rental Housing Responsive to Residents’ Needs.” The [Toronto Housing Charter](#) also reflects as a policy statement that “all residents should have a safe, secure, affordable and well-maintained home from which to realize their full potential.”

2. Expansion of Income and Employment Supports

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the economic livelihoods of community members in Parkdale. Over half of our respondents lost employment or income due to the pandemic, and called for the City of Toronto to work with the provincial and federal government to advance the following recommendations:

- **Raise the rates for Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)** to match the cost of rent and annual rate of inflation. Community members on fixed incomes noted that the CERB allowance of \$2,000 was recognized as the bare minimum income for Canadians, yet OW and ODSP recipients receive far less.
- Implement a **Universal Basic Income** to provide more effective support for vulnerable community members who underpin the economy and avert future emergency situations.
- Advocate to raise minimum wage to a **living wage** that is reflective of the cost of rent in Toronto to support the livelihood of workers.
- Offer **subsidized education, employment programs, and skills training** to support equity-seeking community members in the following ways: entering industries that support their neighbourhoods (e.g. medical, mental health, safety, frontline); upskilling workers to have a better understanding of technology; creating trades training programs that are not age delimited; expanding entry-level employment opportunities for youth and/or people on ODSP; creating employment transition programs for people with criminal records and/or fixed incomes without clawbacks; creating job boards and agencies that provide translated services for newcomer and immigrant communities; and supporting free enterprise for Indigenous communities to open local businesses.
- Invest in the creation of **Green Jobs** by making massive investments in transforming to a sustainable economy that is not reliant on fossil fuels through climate retrofits of existing buildings; installing infrastructure for active transportation and expanded affordable public transit; local food growing; and investments in community projects to bring more land and housing under the land trust regime with funding to green that infrastructure.

Income security and access to employment opportunities that provide a living wage were identified as key indicators of community safety and wellbeing.²

3. Increase Mental Health and Harm Reduction Programs

² The [Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy](#)'s vision statement reflects the recommendations in this consultation, "By 2035, Toronto is a city with opportunities for all: a leader in the collective pursuit of justice, fairness and equity. We want to be renowned as a city where everyone has access to good **jobs**, adequate **income**, stable housing, affordable transportation, nutritious food, and supportive services" (p. 11). In November of 2019, Toronto City Council [approved](#) a [renewed set of actions for 2019-2022](#) to continue the work of the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy. Three objectives under the plan's "Quality Jobs and Livable Incomes" section correspond to the recommendations in this consultation, including, "Improve the quality of and access to income supports," "Create employment opportunities for low-income groups with high unemployment rates," "Improve the quality of jobs" (p. 5).

Over three-quarters of our respondents expressed feeling sad, anxious, overwhelmed, or lonely as a result of the global pandemic, the spike in fatal overdoses in the City, and the global movement against police brutality and systemic racism. Many recognized that mental health crises and substance use issues are intricately tied with experiences of social isolation, income and housing insecurity, criminalization, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, and the lack of systemic responses to poverty. Community members called for the following recommendations:

- Commit significant **investments into mental health and harm reduction programs** to ensure that these programs are fully funded and accessible to at-risk communities, such as providing free counseling for Black individuals and families.
- **Improve existing mental health programs** to ensure that they are culturally-relevant, responsive, support independence, and do not have extensive waitlists.
- Support the **expansion of harm reduction supports and street outreach workers** to address the rise in overdoses, and to **decriminalize and legalize drugs** for more control over the supply.
- Provide **economic subsidies for training and education in wellness** such as mental health support, crisis intervention, de-escalation, suicide prevention, mindfulness, psychotherapy, and social work aimed at helping the people in the neighbourhood.
- Create and invest in **alternatives to the police** in responding to mental health wellness checks, such as crisis response units and trained mental health teams.

The call for mental health and harm reduction programs indicates a public health crisis that needs to be addressed urgently in parallel to the root causes of social determinants of health.³

In addition to these three core priority areas to addressing community health and safety, respondents identified the need for improved access to affordable and public healthcare services and long-term care facilities; safe responses for reopening educational institutions, childcare, and youth supports; food security and community gardens; alternative sources of energy such as wind and solar power; free public transit and more bike lanes; government support for affordable local businesses; and much more. In order for the City of Toronto to build an equitable process in centering the visions of equity-seeking community members in the recovery and rebuild process, our respondents recommended the following suggestions for how to move forward:

- Learn from the growing networks of **mutual aid and community organizing** to build strong, caring, and responsive safety nets within local communities, and provide structural support through poverty reduction, restorative and transformative justice, community wealth building, seed capital for grassroots networks, and protecting the rights of renters.

³ In addition to the [Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy: 2019-20200 Action Plan](#)'s brief mention of mental health for low-income residents (p. 2), the supports recommended for harm reduction programs align with the City's commitments in the [Toronto Overdose Action Plan: Prevention & Response](#). Throughout the pandemic, the City of Toronto developed a [mental health support strategy](#), partnering with key mental health support providers, though explicit City policy commitments for mental health supports are lacking.

- Creating more accessible touch points for community members to engage and influence decision making processes, such as **citizen assemblies, town halls, and community governance boards** both online and in person with public health safety protocols, to foster democracy at the local level.
- Ensure that there are **transparent, clear, and translated communications** about announcements, events, and resources for community members who do not have access to the internet, experience language and cultural barriers, and/or have low-literacy. Community members also suggested providing **low-cost internet and technology access** for people to access base-level communication needs.
- Establish firm commitments to supporting **Indigenous sovereignty and racial justice in leadership** by ensuring the Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities are at the forefront of decision making processes at the City level, the community level through representation on Board structures, and respecting the governance of Indigenous communities through the three wampum belts of the territory: (1) the righteous economy of the Dish with One Spoon; (2) the powerful governance of the Hiawatha Belt; (3) the peaceable cultures of the Two Row wampum.
- Commit funding to these initiatives through the **redistribution of wealth** using progressive taxes and **defunding the police** to reallocate the City of Toronto budget towards community priorities that build community safety and wellbeing, such as affordable housing, income security, mental health, food sovereignty, and much more.
- Prepare for future disasters by building **pandemic training, emergency contingency plans, and disaster relief based on principles of solidarity** in preparation for future climate, sociopolitical, and/or health-related crises.

It is critical for the City of Toronto to recognize the interconnected nature of the recommendations from the Parkdale community: unless we see immediate and extensive economic commitments to affordable housing and income security, we will continue to see degradation in mental health and substance use across the City and increased criminalization and fatalities among racialized working class communities. It can not be taken lightly that at the same time as Recovery and Rebuild consultations are in progress, working poor tenants and individuals without access to housing also find themselves under attack by state-sanctioned economic displacement which frays the social and cultural fabric of their communities. Moreover, engagement in the democratic process is deeply impacted by experiences of poverty, systemic racism, and discrimination against homelessness and people living with disabilities, and therefore the City has a duty to build out more equitable and inclusive processes for engaging marginalized community members in decision making processes and commit to transforming the systems that erode trust and accountability. By collaborating with communities, the City can help lay the foundations for building hope and healing which are integral to transformative change.

We thank you for considering these recommendations for a just recovery,

Parkdale People's Economy