

# The Future of Housing in Little Jamaica and York South-Weston

## Project Overview

As a part of the City of Toronto’s HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan, Black Urbanism TO engaged residents who identify as Black living in ward 5 York South-Weston; ward 8 Eglinton-Lawrence; and ward 12 Toronto St. Paul’s.

The area along Eglinton Avenue West encompassing these three wards saw an influx of Jamaicans and later other Caribbean and African nationals beginning in the early 1970s, making it a vibrant centre of Black Torontonians economic, cultural and social activity. While there has been significant outward migration in recent years to other inner suburb neighbourhoods and to other areas of the GTA, Little Jamaica, as the area is affectionately known, remains the cultural and economic center for the GTAs Black population, with a sizeable community still living in the immediate area.

Weston Road in ward 5 York South-Weston is another area where Black Torontonians have settled in large numbers.

While housing affordability has reached critical levels throughout the city, both of these neighbourhoods are witnessing additional pressure from the major infrastructure projects that are currently underway: the construction of the Crosstown LRT along Eglinton Avenue West and residential development spurred by the Union Pearson Express along Weston Road.

The objective of this consultation was to capture the stories and experiences of Black residents living in these two neighbouring areas of the city, to ensure that their housing experiences and proposed solutions are reflected in the City of Toronto’s HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan.

Black Urbanism TO hosted two consultation sessions on June 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> respectively and had a total of 16 participants. It is believed that attendance was negatively impacted by the weather on June 20<sup>th</sup>, as fewer participants attended than the number that had registered for the session.

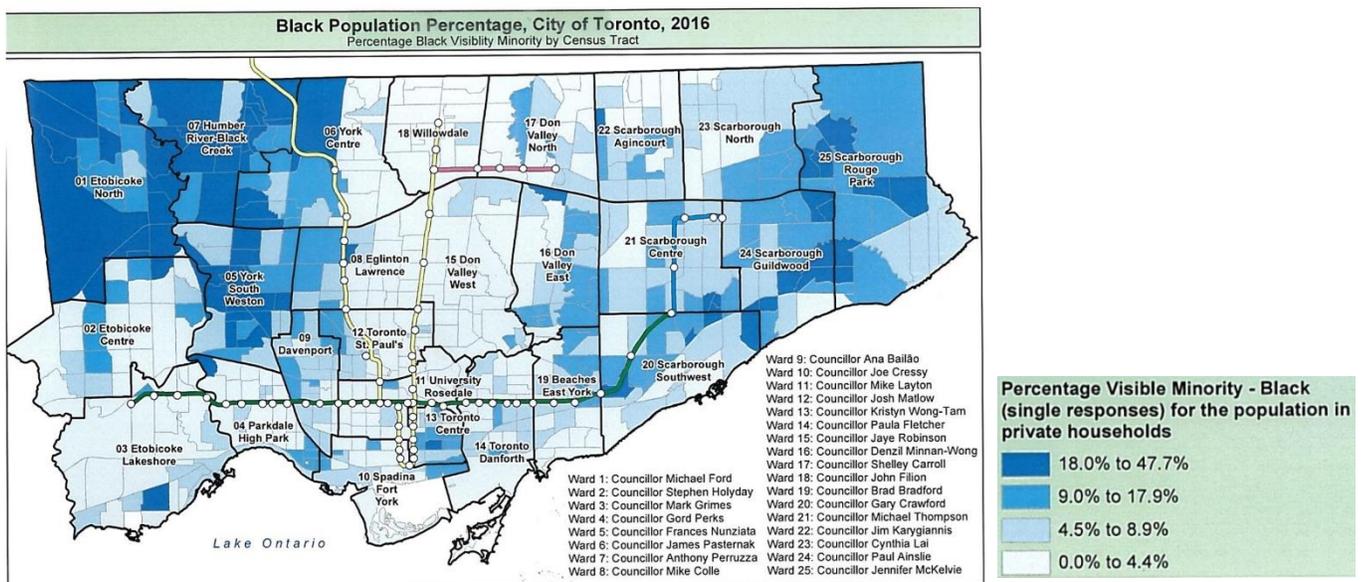


Figure 1: Black population percentage in the City of Toronto

## Findings

### **Activity 1 – Current Housing Situation and Challenges: Part A**

Activity 1 asked attendees to describe their current housing situation in the present, using either a drawing or words to provide the description.

Some of the positive responses looked beyond the immediate living situation and drew on things from the broader community using words such as neighbours, community and culture, safe haven and proximity to transit and a recording studio.

The negative responses used words and phrases such as precarious living, overcrowded, TCHC in need of serious repairs, absent landlords, increasing rent, and bedbugs.

Neutral responses relied on descriptions of the physical form of housing such as semi-detached and apartment.

Overall, the adjectives used in this activity had themes of negativity, indicating at least some dissatisfaction with the current housing situation.

### **Activity 2 – Current Housing Situation and Challenges: Part B**

This activity allowed participants to openly discuss current challenges and concerns around their housing situation. Responses spanned from experiences with overt racism, wages not keeping pace with increases in rent, and the lack of adequate supports for renters through legislation.

Other themes included:

- Rent increases above guidelines to fund building renovations;
- The very poor state of TCHC buildings especially in cases when management has been contracted to another party;
- The inability to advocate for themselves and the need for forming tenants' associations because of the lack of adequate supports;
- Discrimination against renters on welfare and ODSP;
- Gentrification and displacement;
- The community divide between homeowners and renters (local councillors and developers are more responsive to the desires and opinions of homeowners); and
- Young people not being able afford to live in the city.

When asked about their awareness of housing initiatives and supports, participants cited:

- Inclusionary zoning;
- Non-profit developers such as Habitat for Humanity and Options for Homes;
- Rent control;
- Tenants' associations
- Rent-geared-to-income; and
- The Landlord and Tenant Board.

Participants shared experiences both personal and from the people they knew which highlighted the short comings of each of these initiatives. Issues included long waiting lists; the propensity for landlords

to justify above guideline rent increases with little benefit to tenants; and the limited impact that initiatives like inclusionary zoning are expected to make. It was also noted that non-profit solutions like Habitat for Humanity may still present barriers, because some individuals may not qualify due to income levels, yet homeownership by other means remains unattainable.

The one initiative that was noted for its performance, was the added support afforded to renters by tenants' associations.

### Activity 3: Building Up, Building Forward: Part A



The priorities most frequently identified by respondents can be categorized into two themes: wholistic community development and increasing affordable housing supports (e.g. subsidies, rent-geared-to-income) and supply.

Responses in the “stronger rent regulations” category recommended provisions such as holding landlords accountable for poor building maintenance, stronger rent control, and actual decrease in rent.

Although not a recurrent theme, there were notable recommendations for additional supports for the homeless, and support for an inquiry into housing discrimination around race, family size and income (e.g. ODSP).

**Wholistic community development included:**

- Ensuring neighbourhood safety
- Access to parks and green spaces
- Preserving/protecting local culture and heritage (e.g. Little Jamaica)
- Youth programs, services, and recreation that are culturally relevant
- Establishing land trusts
- Housing development tied to affordable transit

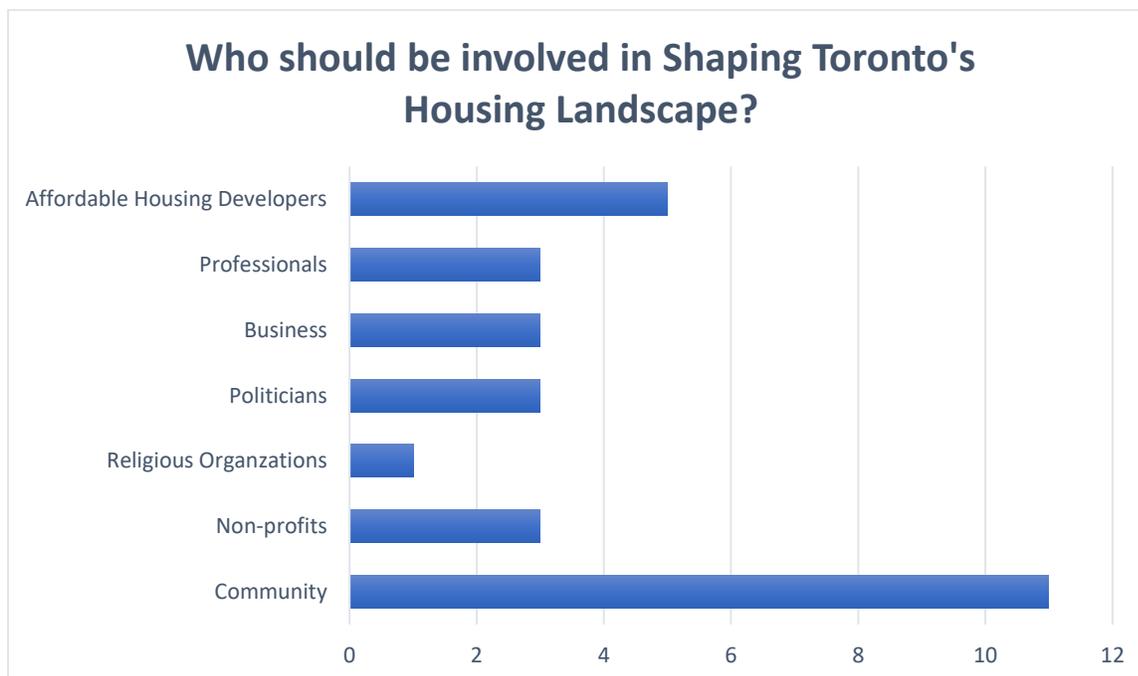
**Increasing affordable housing supports and supply included:**

- Mandatory affordable units in every condo development
- Building non-profit affordable housing
- Having well maintained social housing
- Building more affordable housing
- Increasing access to subsidies and rent-geared-to-income programs

**Activity 4 - Building Up and Building Forward: Part B**

For Activity 4, attendees were asked to suggest ideas for who should be involved in shaping Toronto's landscape for better, over the next 10 years.

Responses were overwhelming in favour of more community-based participation as shown below:



The community actors identified included tenants' and residents' associations; and direct participation of racialized communities, community advocates and youth.

Affordable housing developers included: Options for Homes, Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, Habitat for Humanity, and local developers specializing in secondary suits.

An unexpected response obtained through this activity was the participation of religious organizations, which may own property in addition to worship spaces, that could be used through partnerships to provide more affordable rental housing.

**Conclusion:**

Participants in “The Future of Housing in Little Jamaica and York South-Weston” were keen to share their experiences with housing and demonstrated a deep understanding of Toronto’s current housing landscape. One of the main challenges participants pointed out was the quality of life that is affected by limited housing options especially in the face of significant housing challenges .

Participants indicated that resources dedicated to housing should also consider the broader socio-economic needs of the community such as access to green spaces, culturally relevant programs, preservation of locally significant heritage, and services targeted to youth.

For the participants in our consultation, the future landscape is one in which there is more community involvement than is currently seen today. This landscape will include additional input from a cross section of residents particularly renters with varied lived experiences to provide meaningful insight. This desire for greater involvement can be seen from the awareness of and membership in tenants’ associations, which has seen recent growth throughout the area.

While there is desire for greater community involvement, there was also acknowledgement that meaningful solutions will come from collaborative efforts from a variety of actors including non-profit developers, planning professionals, politicians and non-traditional actors such as religious organizations using all the resources and tools at their disposal.