

St. James Town Research into Action: Improving Living Conditions for SJT Residents

“I don’t think anybody enjoys living surrounded by garbage and rotten organic waste. On a hot summer day, one can actually smell the rotten stench of the garbage inside the apartments...If the environment of a community is polluted, people’s sense of civic pride and belonging is lost. At the end of the day, no one wants to be part of a community that smells.”

-SJT Initiative Participant, Photo Voice Report.

This series of policy briefs analyzes the implications of the research findings from the *St. James Town Initiative* and sets out recommendations and options for action.

St. James Town Residents’ Concerns about the Neighbourhood

- SJT residents identified several attributes of the neighbourhood that impacted their everyday lives and affected their health and well-being, including: (1) garbage/recycling, (2) safety and (3) building maintenance.
- One of the key difficulties in implementing effective policy in St. James Town is that most of the land and buildings (including 14 of the 18 high-rises) are privately owned.
- Therefore, improving the local environment and addressing the key concerns requires engaging landlords and property managers, and creating collaborative mechanisms and initiatives that bring government, property owners and residents together to benefit the community.

(1) Building Maintenance

- SJT residents have expressed serious concerns about decay, neglect and poor maintenance of the high-rises.
- A key problem is that many residents will not lodge an official complaint with the City because they fear being evicted (for example, because the size of their household may violate occupancy standards).
- The City should inform and encourage tenants to register complaints and should make relevant city phone numbers, emails and services about the complaints process available in multiple languages.

The *St. James Town Initiative* is Wellesley Institute’s largest research and community capacity building project. In the first phase of the project, participatory research methods such as Photo Voice and Community Mapping were used. The Initiative is the first of its kind to integrate Photo Voice into concept mapping software to organize data for planning and action. Its goal is to work with the community to better understand the ways in which neighbourhood factors affect immigrant residents’ health and well-being.

(2) Garbage and Recycling

- Garbage overflowing from the bins and strewn across the ground – in the parks, on city property, on privately owned land and in the high-rise complexes – impacts residents in two ways: (1) it is unsanitary, attracts pests and creates a serious health hazard and (2) it makes the neighbourhood unsightly, which negatively affects the community's image and residents' emotional health.
- Most SJT residents are concerned about the environment and want to improve recycling in the neighbourhood. A recent survey found that a majority of residents want to know more about recycling and would like to participate in a recycling program.¹ However, the high-rises do not have proper recycling collection facilities and there are no recycling bins in SJT's public spaces.
- The main reasons that SJT residents do not recycle are the distance of recycling bins from their apartments and a lack of knowledge of which waste materials to recycle.² These issues could be remedied with additional recycling bins and a multi-lingual public awareness campaign.
- The City and residents must engage the landlords to ensure that there are sufficient garbage and recycling bins and that they are emptied regularly.
- Many SJT Initiative participants noted that tenants also share the responsibility to ensure that their living environment is healthy, safe and aesthetically pleasing.

(3) Safety

- Neighbourhood safety is a major concern for SJT residents.
- There are a number of places in the neighbourhood where people do not feel safe to walk at night because of insufficient lighting and omnipresent criminal activity. There has also been increasing gang and drug activity in the neighbourhood.
- The dimly lit tunnel by the entrance to Sherbourne subway station was singled out as a source of concern and anxiety for many residents.³
- Improved lighting in dark areas and alleys is vital to keeping SJT safer and promoting a sense of security in the community.

Action Needed: Public Awareness

- Increasing residents' knowledge and awareness about how neighbourhood characteristics affect health and how they can be improved are an indispensable part of the solutions to these concerns.
- All stakeholders – the City, property owners and managers, and residents – need to work together to develop and expand public awareness programs in SJT regarding tenants' and

¹ Siwakoti, Sachet. "Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices of Women and Men Towards Recycling in North St. James Town, Toronto." Wellesley Institute, St. James Town Initiative, April 2009.

² *Ibid.*, p.11.

³ SJT Initiative Participant, Photovoice Project." St. James Town Initiative, Wellesley Institute, p.40.

property owners' rights and responsibilities, the importance of a healthy environment, and how to access public services and resources.

- SJT residents also need to be made aware of how actions such as littering, disposing dangerous materials inappropriately and even feeding the pigeons can impact the neighbourhood and residents' health.

Research into Action: Programs That Have Already Been Initiated

- On November 13, 2008, the SJT Initiative, Wellesley Institute, organized a meeting with program managers, planners and policymakers at Toronto's City Hall.
- Since then, several initiatives have been undertaken including:

(1) *Bicycle Racks*

- SJT residents complained that bicycle racks in SJT were not well maintained and that bicycles were haphazardly locked on fences, trees and garbage cans, and were prone to being damaged or stolen.
- After the meeting, there was a substantial clean up of abandoned bikes in SJT.
- The City also decided to build bicycle posts on city-owned land in SJT and to work with the private property owners to improve bicycle storage.

(2) *Community Gardens*

- Food Share Toronto – a non-profit community organization – has organized a pilot project in SJT creating community gardens in common space.
- So far, finding appropriate green space for gardening has been a problem, but the St. James Town Action Group has applied to acquire a plot of land next to the Community Centre to start gardening next spring.
- Residents favour community gardens and want to be more involved in the maintenance and development of green space.

(3) *Recycling Ambassadors*

- The SJT Action Group has initiated several small-scale recycling programs.
- The City of Toronto is contemplating developing a Recycling Ambassador Program – an education and outreach program using resident volunteers to help people living in multi-family residential buildings reduce, reuse and recycle – in SJT, although there are issues surrounding recycling capacity and contentious landlord/tenant relations.⁴
 - The program would engage and train resident ambassadors to promote recycling and explain to their neighbours how and why to effectively recycle.

⁴ City of Toronto, 3Rs Working Group (3RWG), "Meeting #17 Minutes," June 4, 2009. Available at: http://www.toronto.ca/garbage/3rwg/pdf/meetings/2009/2009-06-04_minutes.pdf

- It also includes working with (and incentivizing) property owners to ensure that the proper recycling infrastructure is in place.