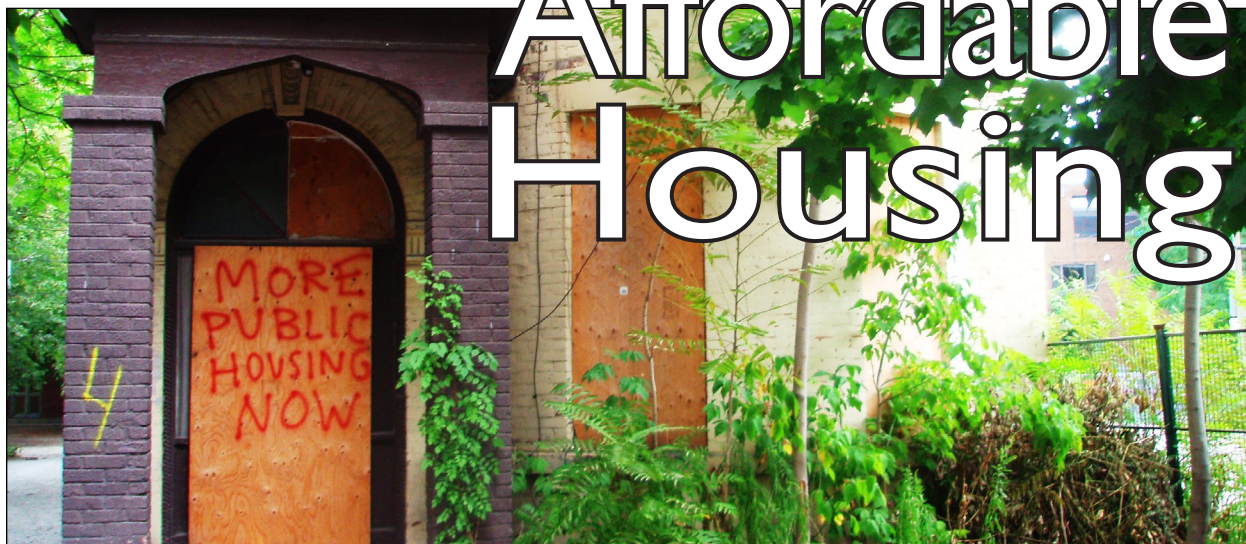


From Abandonment to Affordable Housing



In Detroit, choking on tens of thousands of abandoned properties, the housing abandonment problem is easy to see but effective solutions are hard to imagine. In Toronto, the opposite is true. The abandonment problem is easy to miss, but it is real, and effective solutions are available. This policy brief presents the City of Toronto with a logical and timely new strategy to help address the city's affordable housing crisis by addressing the problem of abandoned properties: a Use It or Lose It bylaw.

Our report recommends that the City adopt a three-pronged strategy of:

- More effective monitoring of abandonment with a problematic-property tracking system
- Preventing existing rental stock from being abandoned through a landlord licensing scheme and better demolition and conversion control
- Reclaiming abandoned housing with vacancy fees and an expropriation scheme that would see suitable abandoned buildings converted into affordable housing with non-profit partners

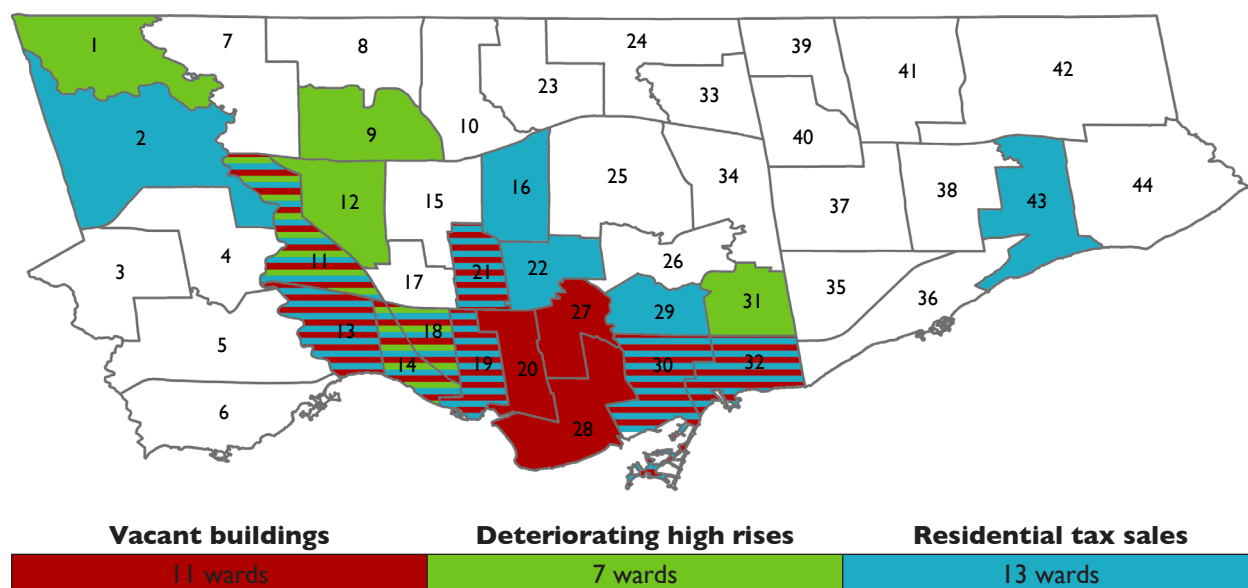


Figure 1: Toronto's abandonment issues by ward

To co-ordinate these strategies, the City should pass a Use It or Lose It bylaw, which would define abandonment and outline the various consequences for property owners of neglecting their responsibilities to the people of Toronto. In the short term, the Affordable Housing Office should incorporate a commitment to preventing and reclaiming abandonment and enacting a Use It or Lose It bylaw into Housing Opportunities Toronto (HOT), the ten-year affordable housing strategy currently being drafted.

Why should Toronto have an abandonment policy? The importance of a made-in-Toronto approach

The policy rationale for taking action against abandonment is clear on a number of levels.

- There is an economic argument: The public has made substantial investments—in transit, in roads, in utilities—in the properties that sit vacant or are deteriorating. These investments are going to waste if the properties are abandoned. Moreover, abandoned properties (and particularly vacant lots) not only may generate less property tax revenue themselves, but they often negatively affect property values of neighbouring buildings. Abandonment costs cities money, and a proactive response is likely cheaper than no response.
- There is also a public-health-and-safety argument: Abandoned properties are tears in the fabric of communities and are magnets for vermin, garbage dumping, fires, and crime.

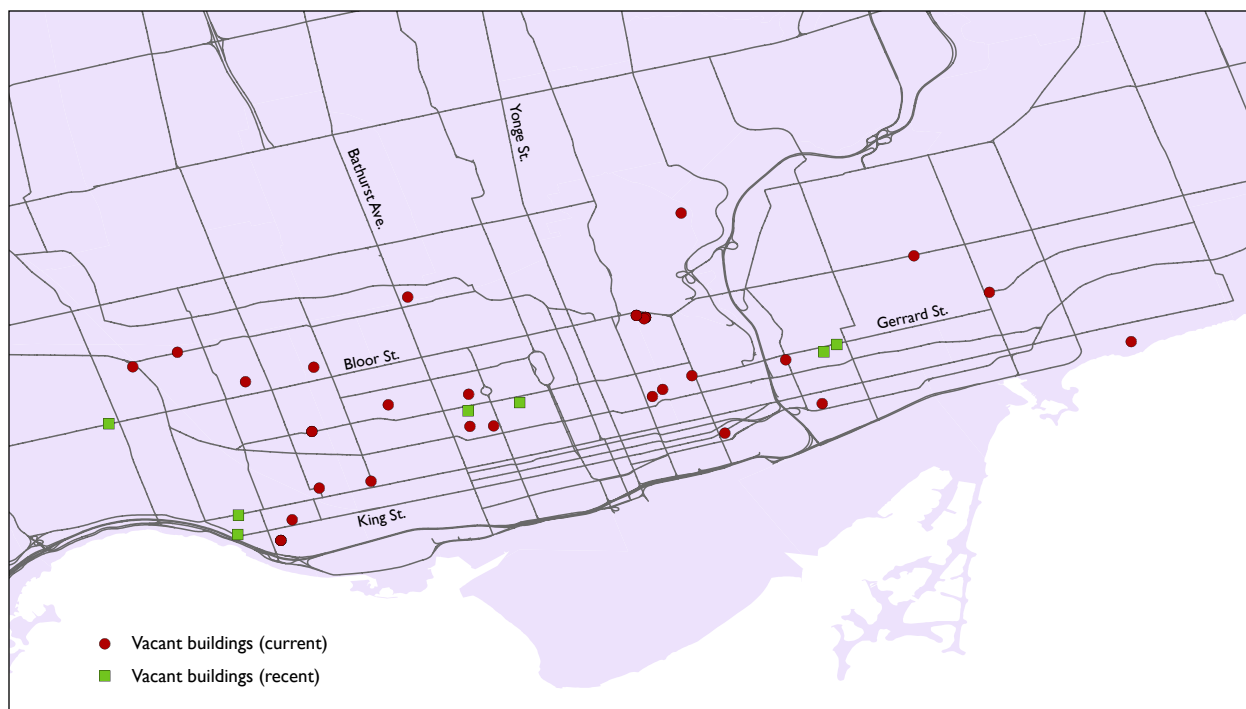
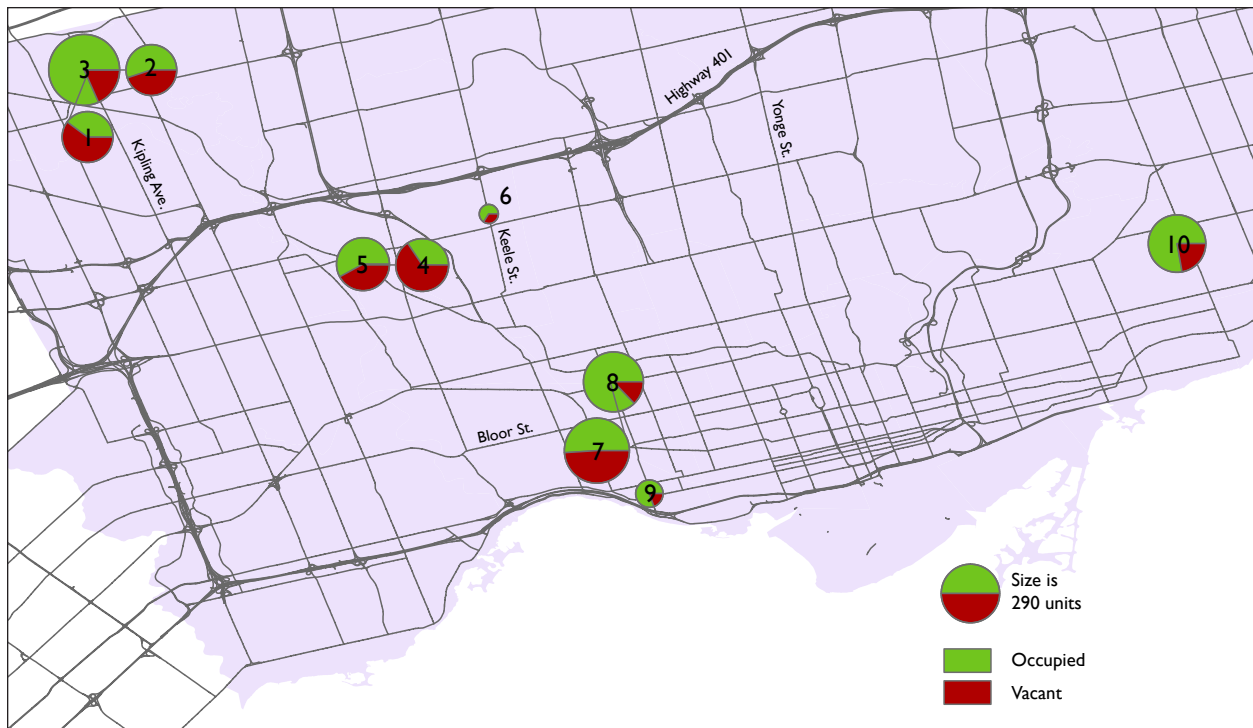


Figure 2: Current and recent vacant buildings in downtown Toronto

- There is a prudence argument: Toronto does not currently have a problem with abandonment on par with many American cities—probably a consequence of its strong property market. But falling property values especially on the east and west coast of the United States have seen even cities with formerly robust property markets plunged into abandonment crises in recent months. If real-estate conditions Toronto take a similar downturn, the presence of proactive policies could be an important bulwark against an abandonment surge.
- Finally, and most importantly, there is a moral argument: Toronto is in the throes of an affordable housing crisis that has seen thousands of citizens made homeless and tens of thousands more housed precariously. Property that could house people is going to waste. When communities assert a collective right to their own neighbourhoods, municipal policy should support them, not oppose them.

The City has a unique opportunity at the present moment to take action on abandonment. The *City of Toronto Act* has opened up a number of new policy options that were not previously available to the City, such as increased powers to regulate and to levy fees. At the same time, the Affordable Housing Office is in the process of preparing HOT, an affordable housing strategy to guide Toronto for the next ten years, and is currently accepting public feedback on a draft of the framework. Policies to address abandonment—both the boarded-up buildings and vacant lots that pepper the city’s



Building	Address	Est. vacant units (2007)	Est. vacancy rate (2007)
1	2667 Kipling Ave.	137/228	60%
2	2677 Kipling Ave.	102/227	45%
3	2737 Kipling Ave.	75/408	18%
4	1765 Weston Rd.	160/246	65%
5	1775 Weston Rd.	103/245	42%
6	2467 Keele St.	14/41	34%
7	1011 Lansdowne Ave.	172/351	49%
8	730 St. Clarens Ave.	39/304	12%
9	165 Jameson Ave.	15/77	19%
10	500 Dawes Rd.	63/284	22%

Figure 3: High vacancy rates in high-rise apartment buildings, (sources: ACORN Canada; Abandonment Issues; MPAC)

landscape and the physical deterioration of low-cost private-rental apartments that provide the majority of Toronto's affordable housing—should be integrated into this strategy. The bottom line is that Toronto is well-positioned to take action on abandonment as means of addressing the affordable housing crisis.

Summary of recommendations

Recommended policy option	Means of addressing abandonment	Senior government action	Resources required for implementation
<i>Monitoring abandonment issues</i>			
Problematic-property tracking system	Better information gathering	N/A	Staff time
Abandonment research	Understanding abandonment in Toronto	N/A	Funding for researchers
<i>Keeping rental housing from becoming abandoned</i>			
Landlord licensing	More effective code enforcement	Province: enabling legislation already passed Federal: expand rental rehabilitation programs	System self-funding
Demolition and conversion control	Prevent demolition or conversion of smaller rental buildings	Province: allow control of buildings with fewer than six units	Staff time
<i>Reclaiming abandoned properties</i>			
Vacant-property fees	Raising money for affordable housing	N/A	System self-funding
Expropriation for social housing	Convert vacant buildings into social housing	Province: allow expropriation without compensation (optional)	Capital for expropriation; staff time
<i>Enabling an abandonment-policy framework</i>			
Use It or Lose It bylaw	Establish legal and policy framework for other strategies	Province: make omnibus amendment to City of Toronto Act	Staff time
Abandonment policies in HOT	Prioritizing abandonment intervention by integrating it into HOT	N/A	None beyond those required for the policies above

For a copy of the complete Abandonment Issues report, *From Abandonment to Affordable Housing*, please visit www.abandonmentissues.ca or send an email to abandonment.issues@gmail.com