

# UNITED WAY GOLDEN MILE LISTENING PROJECT



## *Project Overview*

The United Way Golden Mile Listening Project was part of a partnership between researchers from the University of Toronto Scarborough and United Way Greater Toronto (UWGT). Just Transitions in Action (JTIA) is a community-based research and action project which aims to explore how to accelerate equitable transitions to cities that do not produce carbon pollution while enabling all residents to live good lives. It aims to understand how climate action can advance community members' priorities for their neighbourhood and city, towards more just and sustainable futures.



**United Way**  
**Greater Toronto**

## *Research methods and activities*

In October 2023, two focus group discussion sessions were organized as part of the listening project. These sessions engaged community residents on issues related to the strengths of their neighbourhood and experiences living there, issues, concerns, and visions regarding the future of their neighbourhood. Discussions focused in particular on housing affordability, which was selected because of extensive redevelopment planned for the neighbourhood, including major transit expansion. Approximately 35,000 new residential units are being added to the Greater Golden Mile neighbourhood in Scarborough, as well as a million square feet of retail space near the new Eglinton Crosstown LRT.

### **Participants**

The focus group discussion sessions were attended by a demographically diverse group of community residents. Day 1 involved 7 people, while Day 2 had 12 people. Both sessions were targeted to have individuals with a median household income of approximately \$50,000 to 70,000, and who currently rent a 1–2 bedroom apartment in the Greater Golden Mile (GGM) neighbourhood within one of these postal codes: M4A, M3C, MIL, MIK, and MIJ. Most of the participants had emigrated to Canada over the last few decades. Over two-thirds identified as women. Most were of South-Asian or African descent, while a number of them were of South-East Asian, Caribbean, or Middle Eastern background.

### **Data Collection Methods**

This community-engaged research was co-created with United Way Greater Toronto's Inclusive Local Economic Opportunity (ILEO) team. Participants were voluntarily recruited to join focus group discussions about affordable housing for one of the two days and were also offered an honorarium in appreciation for their time. During the focus group discussions, participants sat around a table alongside the JTIA researchers and the ILEO team representatives who were present. Participants were asked to discuss their experiences of living in the neighbourhood, and what they liked about the neighbourhood. Data collected includes researchers' notes on the researcher facilitated discussion and a short survey.

### **Materials Produced and Collected**

The different types of materials produced and collected during the Greater Golden Mile Listening Project include:

- Notes taken by researchers for each day of the focus group discussions.
- Survey responses from participants.
- Sticky notes in which a few participants wrote by hand what they liked about their neighbourhood and its key strengths.

## Data Analysis Methods

Data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis in order to identify community members' priorities for their neighbourhood and city. Next, scholarly and grey literature was reviewed to explore potential links between each community priority and just climate action, both more broadly and in the context of Scarborough.

Researchers sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the priorities of equity-deserving communities in Scarborough for the future of their neighbourhood and city?
- How can climate action address these priorities?
- What are the potential leverage points that can help generate momentum around implementing these climate actions?

## *Findings and Reflections from the Listening Project*

### Community priorities related to housing

The topic of affordable housing was a central focus of our engagement activities because of United Way Greater Toronto's work in housing and local economic development, and because of the context of the transit-oriented redevelopment of the neighbourhood.

Participants in the focus groups shared their challenges and growing struggles related to affordability of housing and rising rental costs in the neighbourhood.

During the discussion, participants highlighted various sub-themes related to housing as a priority issue in the neighbourhood. These were mainly challenges they were experiencing as a result of ongoing as well as proposed building and housing redevelopments in the Greater Golden Mile. These issues included:

- Lack of awareness of upcoming and on-going housing-related changes in the neighbourhood.
- Changes in the built environment related to new housing developments in the neighbourhood.
- Housing affordability issues, with housing and rent becoming more expensive.
- Neighbourhood gentrification and evictions, including renovictions, characterized by forced or coerced exits from residences.
- Housing quality challenges experienced through poorly maintained residences as well as apartments in not-so-liveable conditions.
- Inadequacy of protections to shield residents from rent increases.

Overall, participants noted some strengths and things they valued about their neighbourhood. These include the sense of affinity they feel with the neighbourhood. Many identified the geographic location as a key strength of the neighbourhood, particularly in terms of access to Toronto's downtown core and to other parts of the city. However, they

also expressed concerns about rapid, and often uncomfortable, changes which were occurring in the neighbourhood. This revolved mostly around new developments and housing projects which they deemed exclusionary and unaffordable, especially in the absence of policies to support and protect the vulnerable and low-income residents.

They envisioned a future in which they could better support their kids, access quality jobs, and a neighbourhood where there are quality social, healthcare and infrastructural supports for residents – a future in which they can continue to live in the neighbourhood they have called home for many years; and not have to be forced to leave because of rising unaffordability.

### **Additional community priorities that emerged**

In addition to housing, additional key priority areas for the community were identified during the discussion. There was significant discussion about the neighbourhood's **facilities, amenities and community supports**. Participants spoke about the proximity to key public amenities and facilities such as libraries, malls, and bus/train stations. They spoke about a vision for the future that did more to invest in the accessibility of community service supports such as health care supports and facilities. Relatedly, the participants prioritized **green and recreational spaces**. They prioritized the presence of green spaces such as parks and the availability of recreational and social spaces where people can connect. Participants also prioritized **community spirit** and a sense of affinity and rootedness with the neighbourhood. They valued a vibrant sense of multiculturalism within the neighbourhood and a sense of community-friendly neighbourhood.

People also shared priorities related to **mobility and transportation**, particularly related to investing in the improvement, efficiency, expansion of and access to mobility and transportation facilities and networks in the neighbourhood. A strength of the neighbourhood was identified as proximity to destinations and places of interest facilitated by the transport network. There are challenges with walkability in the neighbourhood. They envisioned a future in which residents, particularly the elderly, the physically challenged and differently abled, are able to better find their way around the neighbourhood because of the presence of more accessible bus stops, walkable and mobility-friendly walk-ways, and the availability of roadway accessories such as benches. In addition, a future in which residents are better able to cope with their commuting and mobility needs especially during challenging weather.

People also prioritized the provision of **good quality, well paying jobs** which offer people and their families opportunities for better lives. They envisioned a future in which initiatives are in place to help residents cushion the impacts of job losses, precarious employment and/or stagnating salaries. In addition, a neighbourhood with the presence of more advanced and more capable community centres in which residents can get the supports they need, especially in relation to skills, training and capacity building to help them get better paying jobs as well as training on entrepreneurship financial literacy and how to save and grow their finances.

## How can climate action address these future visions and priorities? <sup>1</sup>

Though residents were not explicitly asked about climate, to meet the objectives of the Just Transitions in Action project, researchers then considered how climate action could address the residents' future visions and priorities.

<b>Housing</b>	Housing policies and initiatives that foster green and energy efficient building practice such as retrofits or on-site renewable energy can lower housing maintenance and operation costs. Policy measures that encourage or require owners to decarbonize buildings while keeping existing residents may reduce displacement. In situations of neighbourhood wide investment and development, actions should be pursued that can offset gentrification pressure.
<b>Mobility and Transport</b>	Improving supply of, and access to, low-carbon, climate friendly options such as bicycle-lanes, buses, and light-rail, as well as electrification of public transport, will strengthen public transportation system, reduce reliance on cars, lessen traffic, and improve transportation experiences for residents.
<b>Jobs and Employment</b>	Investments in climate action can generate local job opportunities. For example, incorporating job training and local hiring targets into retrofitting programs. These can also target decarbonization in other sectors such as healthcare, that are not traditionally considered "green jobs" but have significant emissions-reduction potential.
<b>Green and Recreational Spaces</b>	Green space expansion or protection in cities can decrease greenhouse gas emissions and support climate adaptation by storing carbon, regulating temperatures, and managing water flow.
<b>Facilities, Amenities and Supports</b>	Dense, mixed-used, transit-oriented communities are a form of climate action where residents have access to community services locally. A just transition would include displacement prevention measures and the expansion of local community supports aimed at existing residents so that current residents benefit from the new mixed-use, transit-oriented community.
<b>Community Spirit and Family Ties</b>	Community-engaged climate action programs, workshops and events such as collective tree planting, bring-your-family initiatives, and other family-friendly climate action mobilization events can strengthen community bonds and improve family ties, while boosting overall social cohesion and community connections.

<sup>1</sup> These ideas on how climate action might help address community priorities did not directly emanate from the focus group discussions. Participants rarely made these connections to climate action. The discussion questions also did not particularly ask them to make these connections. Rather, the ideas are recommendations being made by the researchers based on interpretation of the priorities and the researchers' perceptions of opportunities for climate-relevant solutions.

## **Potential Leverage Points for Implementing Climate Action**

United Way Greater Toronto is already a major contributor to social and economic development in the City of Toronto. UWGT and partners are key players working towards equitable access to social services and infrastructure for Toronto's underserved communities. Climate change is already impacting the lives of many of the Torontonians and communities whom United Way and partners serve. As such, climate change will present a key risk to achieving development impact in these communities. However, it could also present an opportunity for UWGT to bring climate concerns closer to the centre of their work.