



LISTENING MUST LEAD TO ACTION: ROOMING HOMES IN PICKERING

Yesterday, I sat in the home of a Pickering couple who trusted me enough to share what they have been experiencing as a result of a suspected rooming home operating near their property.

They described vehicles arriving and leaving at all hours, excessive garbage attracting rats, mice, raccoons and skunks, unpleasant odours, individuals using outdoor areas as washrooms, disrupted sleep, safety concerns and the deterioration of the curb appeal and enjoyment of their property. They also expressed concern about the potential effect on the value of the home they have worked hard to maintain.

The residents estimate that approximately 10 people may be living in the house and that at least eight vehicles are associated with it, although the driveway appears to accommodate only four.

These are observations and experiences reported by residents. Whether the property is operating as a rooming home, and whether it complies with zoning, occupancy, building, fire, parking and property-standards requirements, must be determined through a proper City investigation. However, the concerns are sufficiently serious that they should not be dismissed, minimized or left entirely to neighbours to document.

I left their home feeling embarrassed that, despite living only a short walk away and having installed security cameras at my own home because of increased activity in our neighbourhood, I had not understood the complete history or the extent of what my neighbours were experiencing.

I sat with their words throughout the night. This morning, I reviewed my own security footage and saw vehicles arriving and departing from the area at hours when most residents should be able to sleep peacefully in their homes.

This is why listening matters. We cannot fully understand what is happening in a neighbourhood unless we make the time to sit with residents, hear their experiences and look beyond our own front doors.

WHAT DOES PICKERING CURRENTLY REQUIRE?

I have now reviewed Pickering's current regulations.

Under Consolidated Zoning By-law 8149/24, a "rooming home" is a dwelling containing between three and six individually rented rooms, with communal cooking facilities, where the occupants do not constitute a single household.

Where the use is permitted, the zoning by-law requires:

- No more than six rented bedrooms;
- No cooking facilities inside individual bedrooms;
- At least one complete washroom for every five bedrooms;
- The entire dwelling to operate as the rooming home;
- No more than one rooming home on a property; and
- Compliance with applicable parking requirements.

However, the six-room limit does not necessarily mean that only six people may occupy the house. More than one person may potentially occupy a room, subject to applicable building, fire and property-standards requirements. That raises an important question about how actual occupancy is assessed, approved and monitored.

Pickering's parking requirements also warrant immediate review. Outside the City Centre, the zoning by-law requires only 0.30 parking spaces for each rooming-home bedroom. At the maximum of six bedrooms, that calculation produces fewer than two required spaces before the City's rounding provisions are applied.

That standard appears disconnected from the real conditions being reported in this neighbourhood, where residents have observed at least eight associated vehicles.

More importantly, although Pickering's zoning by-law recognizes rooming homes, I have not found a comprehensive rooming-home licensing system requiring an owner to obtain municipal approval before beginning operations.

A building permit or change-of-use approval may be required, depending on the property's existing lawful use, its construction and any alterations being made. Fire Code, property standards, parking, garbage and noise regulations also continue to apply.

But Pickering does not appear to have a clear, mandatory process requiring every proposed rooming-home operator to register, submit detailed plans, pass coordinated inspections and receive an operating licence before renting the rooms.

That is a significant policy and accountability gap.

WHAT DO OTHER MUNICIPALITIES REQUIRE?

Other lower-tier Ontario municipalities have established much more comprehensive approval processes.

Ajax

Before operating a lodging house, an owner or operator must apply for a municipal licence. The application process requires:

- A floor plan showing the dimensions and proposed use of every room;
- A site plan showing buildings, lot lines and the location and dimensions of parking spaces;
- Proof of at least \$2 million in liability insurance;
- Public-health clearance;
- A police clearance;
- Any applicable building or other permits;
- The property owner's written consent if the operator is not the owner; and
- Municipal inspections to determine compliance with the licensing by-law and other legislation.

Ajax also requires annual Fire Services and property-standards inspections. Its by-law allows the Town to place conditions on a licence to protect public safety or minimize public nuisances.

Its parking requirements are considerably stronger than Pickering's. Ajax requires three parking spaces for three lodging units, four spaces for six units and six spaces for ten units. It also requires at least one washroom for every three lodgers.

Simply submitting an application does not authorize the property to operate. The Town must be satisfied that the requirements have been met before issuing the licence.

Oshawa

Oshawa requires every lodging house to obtain an annual municipal licence. Its application requirements include:

- Floor plans;

- A property survey;
- Proof of at least \$2 million in liability insurance;
- A current furnace inspection report;
- An electrical certificate;
- criminal record and judicial matters checks for the owner, manager and operators; and
- Compliance with zoning, the Ontario Fire Code, the Electrical Safety Code and the City's property-standards requirements.

Oshawa also prohibits a lodging house from being located within 45 metres of another lodging house.

Kitchener

Since January 1, 2025, all lodging houses in Kitchener have been required to obtain a licence. Fire and property-standards inspections form part of the initial application process.

Licences must be renewed annually, and an annual property-standards inspection is required. Owners are responsible for garbage and exterior maintenance and must carry at least \$2 million in liability insurance.

Toronto

Toronto's multi-tenant housing system provides another useful model. Before applying for a licence, a new operator must complete a zoning review. If the proposal does not comply with zoning, for example, because it exceeds the permitted number of rooms, the owner may need approval from the Committee of Adjustment.

Changing a single dwelling into a multi-tenant house may also require a building permit, even when no physical construction is proposed.

Applicants must provide:

- A zoning approval certificate;
- Floor and property plans identifying room dimensions and maximum occupancy;
- A waste-management plan;
- A pest-management plan;
- An indoor and outdoor property-management plan;
- A designated emergency contact; and
- A fire-safety plan and Fire Services inspection when required.

The City conducts inspections before issuing the licence, and the licence must be renewed annually.

These municipalities do not wait until neighbours have endured years of problems and submitted repeated complaints. They establish an approval, inspection and accountability process before, or as a condition of, the property being legally operated.

DO NEIGHBOURS HAVE A SAY?

This is an important question.

In most municipalities, neighbours do not have the power to approve or reject a rooming home when it is already permitted by the property's zoning and the application meets all legal requirements. A rooming-home licence is generally an administrative approval rather than a rezoning decision.

If an owner requires a minor variance, zoning amendment or another Planning Act approval, the normal public-notice and participation requirements may apply. That can provide nearby residents with an opportunity to submit comments or speak at a public hearing.

However, if the proposed use is already permitted, nearby residents may receive no advance notice and may have no opportunity to identify practical concerns before a licence is issued, or in Pickering, before the property begins operating.

I do not believe residents should first learn that a neighbouring property has been converted into a rooming home only after parking, garbage, pests, noise or safety problems arise.

A Pickering licensing framework should therefore examine whether nearby property owners should:

- Receive notice when a rooming-home licence application is submitted;
- Be given access to non-personal application information, including the proposed number of rooms, approved occupancy, parking and property-management arrangements;
- Have a defined opportunity to identify site-specific concerns involving parking, waste, pests, drainage, access, noise or property maintenance;
- Be notified when a licence is issued, refused, suspended or revoked; and
- Have access to one clearly identified City contact for complaints and follow-up.

Neighbourhood feedback must be relevant to the operation and physical impacts of the property. It cannot become a mechanism for discriminating against tenants or excluding people because of their income, background, family status, disability or any other protected characteristic.

Neighbours should not have an arbitrary veto over lawful housing. However, meaningful notice, transparency and the opportunity to identify legitimate property-related concerns are reasonable safeguards that Pickering should seriously consider.

WHAT I WILL DO

If elected as Ward 2 City Councillor, I will bring forward a motion directing City staff to develop options for a comprehensive rooming-home approval, licensing and enforcement framework.

The motion will call upon the City to:

- Review the licensing systems used by Ajax, Oshawa, Kitchener, Toronto and other Ontario municipalities;
- Require every rooming home to be registered and licensed before it begins operating;
- Establish an accessible registry of approved rooming homes;
- Require floor plans identifying bedrooms, common spaces and the maximum approved occupancy of each room;
- Require a site and parking plan demonstrating that vehicles can be accommodated lawfully;
- Review Pickering's existing parking formula and whether it reflects actual vehicle demand;
- Require zoning, building, fire and property-standards clearances before a licence is issued;
- Require appropriate insurance and a responsible local owner or property manager;
- Require waste-management, pest-control and interior and exterior property-maintenance plans;
- Establish annual licence renewals and proactive inspections;
- Examine a fair and legally compliant notification process for nearby residents;
- Create one coordinated complaint and enforcement process so residents are not passed from department to department;
- Allow appropriate conditions to be placed on licences to address site-specific safety or nuisance concerns;
- Establish meaningful penalties and escalating enforcement for serious or repeated violations; and
- Report publicly on licences, complaints, inspections and enforcement outcomes.

This work must respect Ontario's human-rights requirements and recognize that rooming homes can provide an important form of affordable housing. The people living in these homes deserve safe, sanitary and dignified accommodations.

But supporting affordable housing cannot mean accepting unsafe conditions, inadequate oversight or the transfer of significant operational impacts onto neighbouring residents.

Protecting tenants and protecting neighbourhoods are not competing priorities. Responsible regulation must do both.

To the residents who welcomed me into their home: thank you for your honesty, your trust and your willingness to share what this experience has meant for you. I heard you. I have begun the research, and I am prepared to pursue meaningful change.

Residents should not have to surrender their safety, sleep or enjoyment of their homes because the City has not established a strong enough system of approval and accountability.

Listening is only the beginning. Leadership means being prepared to act.



Stacey Lepine Fisher

FOR CITY COUNCILLOR - WARD 2

Putting
People **First**
in Pickering