

Courage My Friends Podcast Series 3 – Episode 5
Home is Where the Earth Is:
The Climate Crisis Meets the Housing Crisis

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: Canada is facing a housing problem and in cities like Toronto, this is manifesting as a housing crisis. A crisis of affordability and supply, and one that intersects with the greatest issue of our time, the climate crisis. What are the complexities within this intersection between climate and housing? What does the housing crisis look like through a climate lens? And what should be our vision for housing as we fight for climate justice?

In this episode of The Courage My Friends podcast, *Home is Where the Earth Is: The Climate Crisis Meets the Housing Crisis*, we are very pleased to welcome Emmay Mah, Executive Director of The Toronto Environmental Alliance.

Welcome Emmay. Thank you so much for joining us.

EMMAY: Thank you Resh. I'm so excited to be here today speaking with you.

RESH: Wonderful. So let's get right into this. Why are cities so critical in the climate crisis?

EMMAY: Well, if you think about it at a most basic level, cities are home to the largest share of the world's population. So I'm talking to you from Canada's biggest city, Toronto, and we have both a large population, who are going to be impacted by climate change like other municipalities around the world, but also, The ability to act on climate change.

There's a lot that cities can do about the emissions that are coming from cities. And so we have a tremendous opportunity in Toronto and other cities around the world. If you think about all of us, collectively taking action together, we can have a tremendous impact. And that's not to suggest that all cities around the world have the same responsibility to act on climate change, but there are different opportunities that are specific to individual cities that we can act on.

So for example in Toronto, a lot of our emissions come from buildings and transportation. And those are two really important areas that the city, with the support of other levels of government, can take immediate action on.

RESH: Indeed. And what we're hearing is that 90% of cities, because of where they're built - they're built on seafronts, they're literally on the front lines of the climate crisis. Because they're centers of population and industry, they are major contributors to the climate crisis. And as you are saying, they are also ideal spaces for climate action.

Now, unlike many other cities across the world, Toronto, as you say, where we both are right now, is not on any seafront or near mountain-ranges or built on major shifting tectonic plates and prone to earthquakes. Can or should Torontonians feel, you know, somewhat insulated from climate impacts, from the climate crisis?

EMMAY: I think to answer that question, we have to look at what impacts are residents in the city already experiencing. So one of the things that happens in Toronto is that we do experience extreme heat. So there's a "heat island effect" which folks may have heard of, which relates to how extreme weather, like heat waves interact with the built environment in the city. And heat does get trapped.

And this can really impact residents, particularly those for example, that live in highrise buildings. So you can imagine if a person is living in a highrise building, that say they don't have access to air conditioning, or they don't have a good cooling system in the summer, the temperature can get up to be really, really high indoors.

And this is a very significant health risk. And some residents don't have the ability, for example, to go somewhere else. They may not have a cool space that's accessible to them. So this can really impact them in a severe way. So we really

need to look at the problem both from a whole city perspective, but how it can disproportionately impact different residents. And then that brings us to what should we be doing as a city to address residents that are put at risk, both by extreme weather, but also by, for example, their living conditions.

RESH: And so speaking to that disproportionality, as you say, they really impact, the lower income, highly racialized, seniors, populations. So we're not just talking about having climate solutions, but actually having climate justice solutions. And could you speak a bit more to that distinction of climate justice work?

EMMAY: I think climate justice work starts with recognizing what you've just spoken to, Resh.

So to go back to the example of a senior who may be living on a low-fixed-income in a highrise building, they need to have specific supports that are around them should the situation arise.

One, the physical infrastructure of their building needs to be healthy and safe.

Two, they need to have folks that they can be in contact with them that should they need support, they can access.

So there are a number of really important layers that need to be addressed, and we need to look at the responsibility of different actors, including our government, to make sure that people are living in safe and healthy conditions, especially in the context of increasing extreme weather. So that's why it's really important that we look at what cities can do around having affordable, healthy, and safe housing, available to people in the city.

And everybody having the right to that kind of housing. And then we need to look at also what kind of social infrastructure needs to be available to support residents. And that might be, for example, neighbors, helping neighbors and our city and other levels of government should be supporting those kinds of networks with resources.

I also would be remiss in not coming to one of the core points that we always think about when we talk about climate action, which is reducing emissions. If we don't collectively reduce emissions, these kinds of extreme weather events are going to get worse and worse as we go forward. That means residents that are made vulnerable are going to be impacted more and more. And that is not just.

So in order to move forward from a just perspective; we really need to accelerate our action in, not only mitigating the impacts that we know are already baked-in and are going to inevitably happen, but we need to make sure that they don't get worse.

And so that's where we have to look at this picture holistically and work on all these fronts. And I'm sure we'll talk a little bit more about what that kind of action can look like.

RESH: Absolutely. Because those directly involved in these actions are organizations like yours, the Toronto Environmental Alliance or TEA.

Urban climate action groups are very much part of the frontlines of climate action for cities that, as we've said, are on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

So tell us about the work of the Toronto Environmental Alliance. What are some of the current priority issues that you're dealing with?

EMMAY: So maybe I'll start with the issue that we're speaking about right now, and I want to describe to you Resh a project that we're currently undertaking with a partner and that partner is Community Resilience to Extreme Weather or CREW, as most people know them.

So we've partnered with CREW on a project that's right now taking place in St. Jamestown. And what this project is doing is working with local volunteer leaders to develop a model of community- planning and response to extreme weather events like heatwaves. So we're working with these volunteers who live in highrise buildings in St. Jamestown, which is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in our country. And they have been doing outreach in their buildings, surveying their neighbors to get a better understanding of how heatwaves are impacting people. And they have been working with us to develop this model that has different dimensions of how to prepare for, and respond to, heatwaves.

For example, this would look at what communication systems need to be put in place to alert residents when an extreme heatwave is coming. What kinds of neighbor-supporting-neighbors structures need to be in place to reach residents that may need added support.

And just to speak to your point, one of the things that is so powerful about this work that's being done, is it's really being led by people that have not typically participated in climate policy and programs. So we're talking about folks who are racialized, who are newcomers, who have lower household incomes, and they are really leading this work. And they bring a lot of insight and a lot of wisdom as community members as to how to approach this work. So we're very excited that this work is being done and that their voices are at the forefront of this work.

And not only do we hope that it will benefit residents in St Jamestown, but we hope that what they co-create with us will serve as a model that will bring important learning to other neighborhoods in our city and potentially other municipalities.

RESH: So it's a community-based climate assessment or climate audit that's being generated here?

EMMAY: So yes, the survey gives us that kind of important information about how residents are experiencing this now. But it's also about action. So it's about what do

we need to do from a community perspective to prepare for extreme weather, specifically in the highrise building setting.

And then what kind of actions kick in when a heatwave hits, for example. What kind of cooling spaces are available, for example, to residents in their building or in the broader community that folks can be moved to with support? What kinds of things can folks keep in their own households to make sure that they have the appropriate supplies during a heat wave?

And what do we need to look at in terms of how indoor building environments currently are equipped or not equipped in terms of air conditioning, fans, that kind of thing.

So it is taking a holistic approach. It's quite a new project. We really kicked off work just in April and May. So we haven't gone through a full year cycle yet, but I think it shows a lot of promise in terms of both identifying problems and challenges that are unique to the setting, but really looking at how communities with the appropriate support from government and other service providers can actually lead the response in these situations.

RESH: Right. And again, this is around housing, which is a major issue that we're dealing with in many different respects.

Canada is facing a housing problem. And in Ontario, especially Toronto, many are describing this as a "housing crisis".

So housing prices have skyrocketed. Shelters are overwhelmed. Housing insecurity is increasing, leaving more people, more desperate and without safe and reliable shelter. While according to a 2021 Scotia Bank report, among the G7 Nations, Canada has the lowest number of housing units per 1000 residents.

So this is a crisis in affordability and supply. And according to climate activists such as yourself and TEA and others, this is also a crisis in terms of the climate. So you were just talking about, you know, what are the issues of people who are in housing, but, how do we, extend this in terms of the issues around the lack of housing and plans to build housing.

Could you just speak a bit more of some of the other ways in which housing is connected to climate in terms of housing supply and affordability

EMMAY: Yes, absolutely. And I think, first and foremost, like you've said, Resh, we need to acknowledge that we are experiencing a deep, acute housing crisis.

And this is also an environmental crisis as well.

And there are so many people in our city right now that are experiencing poor housing conditions, precarious housing and homelessness. And this is completely unacceptable.

There is a huge lack of affordable, safe in green housing in Toronto. And one potential thing that points to this crisis is there are tens of thousands of people waiting for social housing here in the city, and that doesn't even speak to the full scale and scope of the problem.

So looking at the sort of connection points to the climate crisis, which we've touched on a little bit already in our conversation. The most obvious one is that folks who are experiencing poor housing conditions, precarious housing, homelessness, are going to be immediately impacted by increasing climate-related extreme weather.

So we've spoken about heat. We also, of course, have to speak about extreme cold. And we also have to speak about flooding. And these are impacts that our city has experienced in very extreme ways recently and will continue to experience. So that just points to the dire nature to act now.

On the flip side of that, if folks have healthy and safe housing that is well constructed and insulated, it's much less susceptible to extreme weather impacts. And it also has the benefit of generating fewer greenhouse gas emissions from heating and cooling. Because just to put it in very simplistic terms, houses that aren't leaky are not going to use the same amount of energy to heat and cool buildings. And you've referred to this, that in Toronto that is our largest source of emissions.

About 61% of emissions come from our buildings, and this includes residential buildings. So given all of that; it's really, really important that we look at tackling these dire issues in tandem and look at integrated strategies and resources to address this.

And yes, we need a much larger stock of green, affordable and safe housing. And we need programs to facilitate people who need access to that housing, to be housed that way.

So it's a huge challenge. It needs all levels of government to come to the table, both in terms of taking action, but particularly investing large amounts of resources.

However, there is a benefit both immediately to the folks who are in dire need of this type of housing, but to the society as a whole, in terms of tackling the housing and the climate crisis.

RESH: Right. And so in terms of tackling this crisis, recently the Ontario government introduced Bill-23 and its intent is in the title, *More Homes, Built Faster*.

Among others, TEA has been advocating against this Bill. Why?

EMMAY: The title of the Bill, which you've just named, is incredibly misleading.

It is both bad for addressing the housing crisis and bad from a climate perspective, and there are no two ways around that. And so I'll unpack that a little bit.

Basically what this bill proposes to do is it's going to gut about 10 existing provincial laws, which will ultimately strip local governments of their ability to build and protect affordable housing and achieve their climate goals and basically protect the environment and plan communities within municipalities. So there's a number of ways which this bill will have these negative impacts if it proceeds as it is presently drafted.

It's quite multi-pronged, so I'll try to highlight just a couple of the high impact areas. And certainly other organizations and advocates are doing really, really good work around explaining and taking action on these areas, including, ACORN. So I would also encourage folks to look at the ACORN Canada website as well to understand the housing impacts.

So we've been speaking about the important role of buildings and reducing building emissions in terms of addressing the climate crisis. One of the things that we are deeply concerned about at TEA is the impact on undermining our city's ability to impose the Toronto Green Standard.

The Toronto Green Standard basically sets requirements for new buildings to be built in a way that are insulated, that have water efficiency. And these things ultimately are important too in the long run for keeping utility costs down. . It also sets requirements for EV charger installation, which as folks may move towards electric vehicles in the future, will reduce wiring and installation costs for future occupants.

It also sets minimum tree canopy green-space, water-quality waste-collection and flood protection standards that really will impact residents in extreme weather events like we've been talking about. But really, just focusing on the requirements that make buildings more energy-efficient is hugely important.

Without the city's ability to uphold the Green Standard, it's not going to be able to hit its current climate goals.

RESH: In terms of the climate goals, so this is really part of the larger plan to bring Toronto to net zero by 2040. And this was voted on by City Council last year, correct?

EMMAY: Yes Resh. And thanks so much for providing that important context. Yes. theTransformTO Net Zero Strategy, the newest version was passed, by City Council just about a year ago. And that has laid out new goals which have established a really strong commitment by the city to reach net zero by 2040.

And buildings, as I've said, are really important part of that strategy. That is the current commitment that the city's working towards. And this would profoundly undermine their ability to reach that commitment.

So the Green Standard is an incredibly important tool that the city has. And other municipalities have also modeled their Green Standard after Toronto. So we're not just looking at impacts in our city, but we're looking at impacts in other municipalities as well.

So basically we're looking at a standard which, if implemented properly, should make housing healthier and safer for residents and should ultimately keep the costs of buildings down. So it's very important that that is upheld.

In terms of impacts on affordable housing, Toronto has policies presently that require developers to replace any affordable housing rentals that are demolished and financially compensate displaced tenants.

So removing or undermining those policies are obviously going to have a serious impact on affordable housing. Especially enabling developers to tear down affordable homes in the city at a time when we are in crisis and we actually need more. And if we're just enabling developers to build more expensive housing, you know, that is such a terrible contradiction .

Another really important element is that right now cities can draft their own inclusionary zoning policies and mandate developers to set aside 20% to 30% of units as affordable. But under this new bill, developers will be required to set aside a mere 5% of units. So that is a dramatic reduction in affordable units.

This is really, really potentially harmful.

One more important thing to note is that a big part of Bill-23 is actually reducing developer charges. So that could potentially strip Toronto of at least \$200 million a year. And that \$200 million is much needed to invest in affordable housing. That is one really significant aspect of Bill-23 that's very concerning.

RESH: And because of that, because it is taking away from city budgets we've also seen a lot of pushback from the cities themselves. Recently a group of mayors penned an open letter against the bill as well. So the cities don't seem to be too happy about this.

EMMAY: And they shouldn't be too happy because ultimately cities are there to plan communities in a way that meets the needs of local residents.

And there's so much about Bill-23 that undermines their ability to plan and resource communities on a most fundamental level, that they should be rising up and speaking out. And this is why I think we've heard from so many former mayors about this.

As you know, we've come through the municipal election. We have just started a new city council term. So there was a city council meeting, that started on Wednesday. And actually Councillors were discussing Bill-23 for hours yesterday. Discussing the impacts on Toronto. And I have to say, I have rarely seen our City Council so unified in their concern and desire to push back on something that is coming from the province.

There were multiple motions, that were tabled calling on the province to modify elements of the bill and outright not pass the legislation, that went forward and were passed by City Council. And so while these motions don't actually have a legal impact on the provincial legislation, it's really, really important that Ontario's largest municipalities speak up alongside other municipalities against Bill-23. And really generate political pressure on the government. And really bring this out into the open, the extent to which this is really gonna impact city planning and budgeting ability.

RESH: So this seems like a bit of a sweet deal for developers, less charges, more development and more land to develop. And this has implications for climate conservation as well, specifically in terms of Ontario's Green Belt. So what is the Green Belt? Why is it important? And what are some of the threats that it's facing from this proposed Bill-23?

EMMAY: Well, I think it's important to differentiate two things. So Bill-23 has another really important potential impact that the public needs to be aware of which is gutting the ability of the Conservation Authorities to weigh in on developments in terms of how they will impact environmentally sensitive areas like ravines and wetlands and whether or not new developments are impacting these areas.

A lot of municipalities rely on the Conservation Authorities to provide advice on whether processes of development should go forward given certain environmental impacts.

While Bill 23 is proceeding, there's also some other things that are happening with regards to the province's Green Belt commitments.

Firstly, what is the green belt? It's 2 million acres of protected land. So this includes farmland, forest, wetlands, rivers, lakes, in the golden, the Greater Golden Horseshoe area.

And so we're talking about not only really vital habitat and environmentally sensitive areas, but also food growing areas. Areas that provide what we might call "ecosystem services" to surrounding communities. So a big part of this land, that protects us, if we're thinking about it in a human centered way is that it serves as flood protection.

So we really need to think about, in Toronto, not only the fact that we're sort of an isolated little island in terms of being a city, but like we're part of a broader ecosystem and Ontario's Green Belt is so vital for this ecosystem to function.

RESH: And it's one of the most environmentally rich areas in the country. Is it not?

EMMAY: It is so rich for all the reasons that I've just mentioned and more, and I really encourage folks that wanna learn more about the Green Belt to go to the Green Belt Foundation's website.

So what we have to really think about is not just the short-term, we don't actually need housing to be built in the Green Belt.

There are other available areas to build housing. What we need to think about the Green Belt as is a resource for us now and for future generations that can really provide an incredible natural set of systems that support health and wellbeing for us and other creatures on this land.

And so what is happening right now is the Ford government is proposing that developers be able to essentially pick off chunks of the Green Belt in land swaps. So build on parts of the Green Belt and then do trade-offs in terms of other land outside the Green Belt. And this is really threatening natural systems and the has the potential to create more sprawl.

And the Ford government said they would not do this. So they're essentially going back on their word.

RESH: Yet the idea and the attitude behind this act and probably shared by quite a few people out there, there's so many stakeholders in this issue, is that, you know, look, we're in the middle of a housing crisis. In order to build more homes, we need more land. The priority has to be on putting roofs over heads. So how would you respond to that?

EMMAY: I think it's really a falsehood to pit housing against the environment. And we've already talked about why these things are very intrinsically connected. And I will just bring up the point again, we don't need Green Belt land to build more housing. There are other places to build more housing. And so really what we have to question as residents is what is the agenda here?

Really what we're looking at is an agenda that is designed to serve specific development interests, that are contrary to residents' interests.

It is in all our interest to build green affordable housing. It is also in our interests to preserve natural land and resources and food growing areas. So these things should not be pitted against one another. And I think that it is a falsehood that is purposely being constructed to serve these development interests. And so we really need to push back against this. This is incredibly shortsighted.

RESH: And you had brought up this term of *urban sprawl*, right? And there seems to be two approaches to this, that when we are engaging in urban sprawl, which is

building out this is not an environmentally friendly way to go that instead we should be going for *urban densification*.

What do you think about that? And could you explain a bit more the difference between urban sprawl versus urban densification?

EMMAY: Thanks Resh. I think you did a really good job, already, and I will say I'm not a planner. But what is incredibly important is that we have dense, well supported complete communities or complete neighborhoods in our city.

Yes, we do need to build more housing that is dense. So for example, more multi-residential housing, but we don't just build that in isolation. It needs to be built in a way that's supported by transit, that allows residents to access really essential services and amenities within walking distance.

So we're talking about green-space, we're talking about health services, we're talking about schools, we're talking about opportunities for making a livelihood near to home. And all of this requires very good planning. And so to link this back to Bill-23, the province should not be undermining the ability of municipalities to do this kind of planning or generate the resources, for example, from development to invest in green spaces around where housing is being built.

Really what we're looking at is effectively using urban space in a way that's well supported and people have what they need close to their homes. And in doing so, that is the opposite of pushing out housing developments into for example, environmentally sensitive areas. And also generating situations where, for example, people need to drive a long distance to get to what they need because there isn't transit infrastructure, there aren't things that they need to access within walking distance.

So instead of us blaming individual folks who may not have access to what they need close by and therefore may be compelled to drive because they don't have good transit where they live; we need to be looking at this from the systems view and from a government responsibility view in terms of responsible planning.

RESH: This is also a real field for creativity and one of the popular ideas that's coming in is that idea of the 15- minute city, right? That everything is just within walking distance so that people don't have to use their vehicles at all.

EMMAY: Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's important to point out that this is a really big equity issue. It's critical for us to look at where does that kind of access exist now in our cities? And where does that need to be created?

Not everyone has the ability to hop on a frequent service transit vehicle where they live, for example, to get where they need to go. Not everyone - and this was certainly made plain I'd say in pandemic times - not everyone has access to good green space where they live, which is so essential to health and wellbeing.

So we really need to look at this not only as something to do for the environment, which obviously benefits us all, but it really is about looking at quality of life for everyone and where we can make people's lives better by increasing access to the fundamental things that they need.

RESH: So going back to the climate sustainability of housing. We're not just talking about housing to be built, but, and as you started this conversation, we're also talking about the climate upgrading and retrofitting of housing that already exists, the places where we're all living and working. Indeed, for many of us during the pandemic, we were doing pretty everything from the same place, our homes.

And according to the recent Greenhouse Gas Inventory in Toronto, a point that you also made Emmay, the majority of greenhouse gas emissions aren't coming from our vehicles, but are actually coming from our buildings, from our homes. In terms of what went into their construction, the materials they're made from, as well as everything that we're doing in them now, right? The cooking, the heating, lighting. So this demands major retrofits, which is being done, and organizations like TEA have been involved in this. So could you speak a bit more to what we mean by retrofitting.

EMMAY: Yeah. I'm so glad that you brought this up, Resh because retrofits are such an important part of our climate solutions bundle, if I can put it that way. We've talked about the Toronto Green standard already, and obviously it's a lot easier, provided that that isn't obstructed, to build housing in the right way from scratch.

However, we have an existing housing stock that as you say, needs to be retrofitted. So measures need to be put into our homes that make them more climate proof. And like I said earlier, less leaky. So a lot of the emissions that we're generating, especially given the climate that we live in here in Toronto, are coming from heating and cooling and people do need to be able to heat and cool their homes.

But at a most fundamental level, if homes are properly insulated, and that's one important aspect of retrofits. If they're insulated properly for example, wall insulation, properly fitted windows that aren't leaky, that is really gonna help reduce the amount of energy that we're using to heat and cool our homes.

Another aspect of this too that I just wanna point out, because this needs to be done on such a large scale. It's going to generate green jobs. So that's an opportunity, right, in the skilled trades to have more folks join that workforce, including people from equity-owed groups, that haven't necessarily had a huge participation in the skilled trades, to join a green workforce. So we need to be planning for that too. And the city has made a commitment to do that.

The other aspect that's really important is, you know, what can government do to incentivize and motivate people to undergo retrofits? So often we talk about individual homeowners. And that is an important part of the picture. What supports they can access. In Toronto, there is the Help Program, though it needs to be scaled up on a much larger scale.

But I also think we really need to discuss it in the context of multi-residential buildings, highrise buildings. So we need programs to support landlords to do these retrofits. But do so in a way that doesn't create risk for tenants.

We often talk about the risk of *reno-victions*, where a landlord might evict tenants under the auspices of doing improvements or retrofits. And so when we're thinking about designing programs that will incentivize landlords to do these retrofits, there have to be strong provisions that prevent that kind of thing from happening.

So I think on the whole, there's a huge opportunity for Toronto to invest in retrofit programs, but we have to be mindful of all the differential impacts. And we also need to look from a planning perspective of how do we optimize this opportunity, build our green sector, build our green workforce in a way that really generates good livelihoods for people and allows them to more fully participate in climate action

RESH: Yeah. And stay in their homes. That's a really interesting point that climate retrofitting could actually be used as sort of justification for gentrification.

EMMAY: That's right. Yeah. And we know that given the current state of the housing crisis, this is not something that we want to be for those who are advocating for this kind of action, very harmful, unintentional impact. So we've gotta really look at the big picture as we're moving forward with some of these kinds of programs and incentives,

RESH: So going back to Toronto's Net Zero by 2040 plan, right? Which means that by 2040 we want to reduce or eliminate greenhouse gas emissions; we wouldn't be emitting more than we are absorbing.

And according to the City Council website, this is one of the most ambitious plans in North America. From your perspective, in your opinion, Emmay, are we on the right track to achieve this?

EMMAY: I would say that the plan is on the right track, or the strategy is on the right track. I can't actually say as of yet from an implementation point of view if we're on the right track.

I mean, you referred to the Atmospheric Fund's newly released Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory. That points to the fact that we have a lot of work to do in our city to get on the right track. And a huge piece of bringing this TransformTO strategy to life is actually investing in it to the level needed.

And so what we really need to see is the city of Toronto to use its own revenue powers that it has to raise more money, more money. That's a funny slip. More money for the TransformTO strategy, but also for other levels of government to come to the table.

So we've been talking extensively about Bill-23, which is going in the wrong direction. In fact, we need to see the provincial and federal governments enabling resources to flow to municipalities like Toronto that can have significant impacts, positive impacts on achieving climate goals instead of obstructing them.

So the investment piece is really key and what we're talking about really, is accelerating the kind of housing actions that we've been discussing. It's creating a stronger and more affordable transit system and more expansive with frequent service routes, with dedicated bus lanes. Really looking at how these actions happen on a timeline that's gonna hit the ambitious targets that are part of the strategy.

Not just the 2040 one, but we've got other big targets coming up, including a 2030 target. It's just on the horizon. So we need to take that action now. The strategy is very new. It was just past last December. So the city staff haven't really had the chance to fully implement, but they really need the level of resources to meet the ambition of the strategy.

RESH: Right. And again, this strategy is part of that larger strategy, as you've mentioned, TransformTO, which was unanimously adopted in 2017 by the Toronto City Council, really to bring Toronto in line with global climate commitments.

EMMAY: Yes, like you said, we had TransformTO adopted in 2017, and then we've had a newer iteration adopted last year. And what led to a newer and more ambitious climate strategy being adopted was really getting the city to declare a climate emergency.

This is something that TEA was involved in, in collaboration with other allies and groups that are part of the Toronto Climate Action Network.

I just really wanna give a shout out to the Global Youth Movement and the youth movement here in Toronto. We had Fridays for Futures and Climate Justice Toronto, which were youth-led groups who organized Global Days of Action in September, 2019. And we were really able to take advantage of that opportunity, that groundswell, the momentum, and really call for the city to declare a climate emergency.

And that included robust calls to action, including more ambitious climate targets, the city having a greater equity focused and looking at climate action, including a green jobs strategy, just to name a few aspects of that.

So it was really important from a community-centered perspective to organize around that and actually push City Council to adopt a climate emergency that wasn't just in name only, but actually laid the foundation for adopting this newer, more robust TransformTO Net Zero strategy.

RESH: Wonderful. And we did have some of those young activists actually at the end of our last season of the podcast, speaking to how critically important this issue

is to these younger generations and how they're actually really getting out there within the city, across the nation. And also going to, the global conferences. We just saw the last one with COP27.

So TEA has been launching many initiatives, and we were talking about highrises. One of those initiatives was the Zero Waste Highrise Project. So Emmay, could you tell us a bit more about that?

EMMAY: Yes, it would be a pleasure to talk about that project. It's one that TEA has been working on for quite a few years now. So basically it started with a challenge which looks at the fact that over half of Toronto households live in highrise buildings, but their buildings don't always enable them to have access to proper facilities to support waste reduction and diversion.

And often this issue is really looked at on a surface basis, from the perspective that single family homes have better or lower waste rates than highrise buildings, like dramatically so. And often that leads to certain assumptions, like people in highrise buildings don't care about the environment or they're not responsible. But really what it is, is an equity issue when they don't have access to proper facilities and infrastructure to do waste sorting and waste reduction activities.

So our Zero Waste Highrise Project started with this challenge and worked with teams of residents and building staff, in project buildings to develop their own Zero Waste plan. What was involved in this was creating how- to resources and connecting them with other buildings that were modeling good practices.

And so we did this through building tours and when the pandemic hit, we had to pivot to online learning sessions. But what was really powerful was this sort of peer-based learning model, which really shows building residents and staff, what kinds of solutions are possible. So some of the things that the buildings ended up implementing were things like converting their garbage-chute to an organic-chute. Or making their organic-chute more accessible to residents using wheelchairs and other mobility devices. Setting up sharing-shelves for residents to leave high quality, but unwanted items for other residents or to contribute to charity. So it was really incredible to see, a growing number of highrise buildings, just enacting these solutions that were specific to their buildings and made sense in their buildings and actually building a culture of waste reduction. Which shows that this kind of approach to solutions can be adopted on a much larger scale. And if we're thinking about over half of Toronto households living in these highrise buildings, then we need to make sure that we are enabling solutions that make sense in that context. And this is true in Toronto, but it's also true in other places across the world.

RESH: It is important everywhere, but Toronto, "Crane Capital of North America", more and more highrises are on the horizon. You can barely see the horizon in downtown Toronto because of this. Many of our listeners, as you pointed out, are living in a highrise buildings.

So how can they get involved? This is not just for building managers to say, Hey, TEA this is great. We wanna get our buildings involved! But residents can actually start planning within these buildings themselves, correct? So how would they start to get involved in this?

EMMAY: A first step, if they want to visit our website, we do have information on the project. We have a video that talks about some of the inspiring practices and lessons learned. And we have some resources and tools that are available.

Our formal project actually concluded, but what we saw was that buildings kept running with this, you know, past the conclusion. And that's actually a success to us, the fact that it doesn't just depend on TEA continuously working for buildings to take this forward. So we're happy to connect through folks who may visit the website and want to learn more. We'll be happy to keep in touch and point them in the direction of resources that they could use in their own buildings. And what they'll see, I think, when they visit the website is just how possible it is to do this.

But what I will say is implementing these kinds of solutions in buildings does take a team. So one of the important steps is either organizing an existing team to start talking about what kind of plans and priorities they might like to implement in their building or to convene a group of residents and building staff that are interested in perhaps forming a green team or something like that. Because it's very hard for individual residents just to take this on as individuals, it can be quite daunting. So you really want other folks there to collaborate with you and support initiatives in the building.

RESH: And there are so many buildings that are involved in this, right? I mean, I'm looking at the website. You've got buildings from Scarborough to Brampton to North York, downtown Toronto, where you have these residents coming together in these great community climate groups. And again, they're being so creative. You've mentioned some of the initiatives that they have started in their buildings.

And I have to share, one of my favorite ones, it's a small action, but it really struck me, is the cooking oil collection barrel. So who doesn't have used cooking oil? You can't pour it in the sink, it'll clog the drain. You have to wait for it to harden before you toss it. Where do you toss it? And this idea is everybody in the building pour your cooking oil into this barrel. It'll be collected, recycled. You know, it's a small idea, but they have the small ideas to the large ideas.

EMMAY: Yeah, absolutely. And it's just, it's a great example of how these measures can make daily life easier and better. And so-called smaller measures like that, but also measures like not requiring folks to bring their compost all the way down to the basement. If you're living in a tall highrise building, that is a chore. And it's not always doable for all residents to be able to go down to the bottom of the building with their bag in hand. That's an accessibility issue. So these can really improve people's quality of lives, these solutions.

And I do think I need to give a shout out to a particular model building, which is Mayfair on the Green in Scarborough, which really inspired a lot of this work. It's not just about TEA and TEA staff suggesting these ideas to buildings; it's about buildings like Mayfair on the Green, that were already modeling these good practices and us being able to connect other building residents and staff with what they're already doing. That was really implementing a lot of these measures and really creating a culture in the building that people were being invited into that provided the inspiration to this project and led to a lot of successes.

RESH: That's a valuable point, right? I mean, so much of the work, so many ideas, they're coming from communities themselves. That's the nature of community work. Communities are hubs of expertise and brilliance and inspiration.

Emmay, through a climate justice lens, ideally what should safe, sustainable, climate-friendly housing look like? When you are dreaming of that ideal world, what does that look like to you?

EMMAY: You know, it's such an important question, Resh. I hope you get to ask it of many different folks. Because I come with my own lens and my own experiences. And this is a question that we should be asking everyone.

So when you ask it, I kind of close my eyes and just try to picture what it looks like. So, you know, if I'm sitting in a room, let's say like a living room or something like that. And say there's like a storm raging outside. I'm not worried that there's gonna be water dripping in through the windows or other areas of the home. You know, I'm able to just sit there in comfort, not worried that that storm is gonna impact my living situation. If I'm sitting in this room, in the house, I'm also comfortable. I'm not experiencing any discomfort from the temperature of the house. It's not too hot, it's not too cold. The air quality's not affecting my breathing. I can breathe easily. I'm not sweating, I'm not shivering. I'm just comfortable. And you can say, oh well these are just like basic things. But so many residents in our city don't have these basic things in their experience of housing.

And when I need to make adjustments. For example, let a breeze in to my home. It's not impossible for me to go open a window. Air circulating.

If I'm thinking about this and not everyone maybe has the luxury to think about it, I'm also not worried about the impact my home is having on the environment. I'm able to feel comfortable knowing that the measures I have in place to heat or cool my home are the best possible ones that I have access to.

And we've got a long way to go in terms of having a clean energy grid. But there's still things that we can do now around how homes are set up and heated and cooled that are still a lot better than the status quo.

So ultimately when I'm thinking about climate-friendly homes, I'm really thinking about the health and wellbeing of those people. And that should be the starting point.

Because a well constructed, well insulated home, will be a climate-friendlier home and it will provide a higher quality of life to people who are living in it.

And you shouldn't have to be a homeowner to experience this. You should be able to experience this as a tenant in the city. You shouldn't have to live in a single-family home to experience this. You should be able to experience this in a highrise building in our city. So those are the first things that come to mind. I'm sure there's a lot more that could be said.

But when we're talking about climate justice, it's really important, obviously, to bear in mind the disproportionate negative impacts that so many people are experiencing. But we have to envision and fight for what's better and what should be a right.

RESH: It's a beautiful vision, Emmay. And how can listeners of this podcast get involved in realizing visions like that? What would be at least one piece of advice you would give?

EMMAY: I'll have trouble containing myself maybe to one. What I really wanna start with is the importance of speaking up.

Our governments, as imperfect as they may be, are there to serve us. And we have seen time and time again that when the public speaks up and raises its collective voices really, really loud, we actually can have an impact.

As we've talked about, we have been mobilizing against Bill-23 and I just received an update this morning that it is starting to have an impact.

I don't know by the time this podcast airs, what the current status will be of the Bill, but I just heard, for example, that the province has extended the public consultation period on the new Green Standards clause by 15 days, until December 9th. So that might be a small incremental win right now, but it shows that all the public pressure is having an effect. And there are many other aspects that we need to cover in terms of Bill-23.

So when governments aren't acting in our best interest, we have to speak up. We have to take action. And TEA offers the opportunity for residents to take action and so do a lot of the other organizations, whether they're pushing back on housing, environmental, or other aspects of the Bill. That's in a negative context.

But also in a positive context, it's really important that folks can go to City Hall, which should be a hall of for the People, and voice the kind of solutions they want to see happen in their communities and the kind of investment they want to see there.

For example, when we get around to the city's budget process, which is going to happen very soon, it's really important for those that are able to, to raise their voices and speak about what's important to them and where investments need to be made. And at TEA we try to make that possible.

There's always the opportunity to give public deputations for council, but folks might not be able to do that depending on their life and work schedules. So there are ways to take digital action, call City Councillors. Email City Councillors, for folks that have the bandwidth to do that, it's really, really important. That's in terms of interacting with local government, which I'm a big proponent of.

And the other point I'd make, we've been talking about our Zero Waste Highrise Project is the work that's being led in community, by community members. And we want to support and enable that kind of work.

Community members often have the deepest perspective on what solutions will work locally, and understandably so. They bring a lot of knowledge and wisdom and lived experience to working on solutions. So I want to strongly encourage folks that have the impetus to really, really move forward with solutions they know are going to work with their communities. And organizations like TEA should be supporting them and so should local government.

And so we are going to continue to proactively look for opportunities to do that. Like our Zero Waste to Highrise Project work, like our Heat Wave Project work in St. Jamestown.

And when we're doing this work, we're having a bigger impact because we're showing what is possible. And sometimes in this really, really challenging environment with multiple crises, like affordability crisis, the housing crisis, it's hard to think about solutions. It's still really incredible that despite these challenges, community members are modeling what's possible. And we just need to fight for more resources to support this kind of work in neighborhoods across our city, but also beyond our city as well.

RESH: Emmay, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure.

EMMAY: Thank you so much Resh for this opportunity. And I think it's just amazing that your podcast exists and creates the space to really talk about, not only the actions that we need to take, but the ideas that we need to bring forward that are going to create a better future. So thanks for helping to keep us positive and hopeful and inspired to continue doing this work.

RESH: Thank you so much, Emmay.

That was Executive Director of the Toronto Environmental Alliance, Emmay Mah.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of the Courage My Friends podcast. Thanks for listening.

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