Out of the Long Dark Hallway:

Voices From Winnipeg's Rooming Houses

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Table of Contents

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Out of the Long Dark Hallway: Voices from Winnipeg's Rooming Houses

Interviews with Caretakers

Interviews with 15 Rooming House Owners: "You Get What You Pay For."

Workshop

Community Perceptions Regarding Rooming Houses

Emergent Best Practices

Literature Review

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study is to critically examine rooming houses from a community-based "people and place" perspective. This approach includes surveys, in-depth interviews and a workshop. The instruments used in the study were aimed at learning about rooming houses, the people who live in them and those who share the neighbourhood. The study focused on St. Matthews-Maryland, Spence, and Osborne Village.

History shows that rooming houses were once a commonly accepted and respectable form of housing, but that in recent decades they have become a neglected final housing option for the very poor. The Winnipeg context has been nationally recognized as particularly acute.

A major factor in ensuring rooming houses are a safe and livable form of housing is the enforcement of appropriate regulations; yet care should be taken in creating and enforcing regulations, as they can have unintended or inequitable consequences. Alternative or flexible means of addressing safety codes can be more financially viable for owners.

In the course of this research five different surveys were conducted with: low-income households; rooming house tenants; caretakers; owners; and nearby community members.

The general themes coming out of the tenant and caretaker surveys stress the importance of relationships within rooming houses. Tenants, owners and caretakers must all work together to ensure rooming houses are well-run. However, there must also be support to develop better rooming houses. Many said the houses need to be fixed up but to do this government will have to help. The major theme from owners is the recognition that rooming houses are a business and need to be profitable if they are to remain a viable housing option. Given the financial realities of the $236 shelter allowance, the only way owners can now make a profit is by running down the house.

However much it matters to improve the physical condition of rooming houses, it is equally important to recognize that many tenants have special needs requiring medical, psychological or other supports, and at present, unfortunately, these responsibilities are being delegated ever more frequently to rooming house owners. Owners insist that they are businesspeople, not social service providers.

The community survey shows an appreciation for rooming houses as a necessary form of housing. Rooming house residents are seen by many as neighbours and friends. A minority of community members felt negative about the presence of rooming houses nearby. Yet the extent to which rooming houses are perceived by the community in a positive light appears to be dependent on the effort owners put into investing in their properties, and the efforts owners put into the greater community.

The report concludes with recommendations intended to make rooming houses a more livable and financially viable form of housing for both tenants and owners.

1. Introduction and Background

Welcome to a typical rooming house...

...containing 6-12 rooms and with the entrance through the front door. Most have no buzzers: just bang loud enough on the front door and hope someone lets you in. Once in (and in the bigger houses, it's easy enough for strangers to wander in) you face a hallway with three or four locked doors. Behind each door is a "suite" or room. Some are only big enough for a bed and a bureau. Some are more luxurious — a double room which includes the former living room (now a sitting room with fridge and microwave) and the old porch (now a bedroom). Rooms are separated by drywall. The bathroom and kitchen are down a long hall or on another floor. Room security is limited to the thin door separating the room from the hallway. Hearing, smelling and experiencing neighbours is part of life in a rooming house.

1.1 Introduction

For many people, including those concerned with the health and revitalization of inner-city neighbourhoods, rooming houses are generally seen in very negative terms—they are poorly maintained, crowded and the likely locations of violent crime. These stereotyped perceptions are often reflected in local media headlines, many of which make a point of referring specifically to rooming houses in these contexts. It is not surprising then, that stated outcomes in many neighbourhood renewal plans call for the reduction or elimination of rooming houses and an increase in single family home ownership (Spence Neighbourhood Council 1998). Yet, the very real economic and physical circumstances of Winnipeg's low-income housing market have made rooming houses a necessary component, so much so that it has been referred to by some owners as an "industry". (Nelson 2001, 8) Many social activists also see rooming houses as part of our society's "industry of poverty"–an industry of rooming houses, food banks and soup kitchens–fueled by outdated government policies.

> *Many social activists also see rooming houses as part of our society's "industry of poverty"–an industry of rooming houses, food banks and soup kitchens–fueled by outdated government policies.*

Given the high number of rooming houses in Winnipeg (see Section 1.9) and their status within the local housing market, it would seem desirable to study them with a view to gaining a better understanding of their condition and operation. Such a study could determine the ways in which rooming houses could become more viable, safe and positive environments in which to live.

In Winnipeg, little work has been done in terms of speaking to rooming house tenants and exploring the importance of relationships between tenants, landlords and each other, and the role these relationships play in the creation and maintenance of decent, safe and affordable housing. (although see Higgitt 2001)

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to critically examine rooming houses from a community-based "people and place" perspective. This approach includes surveys, in-depth interviews and a workshop. The instruments used in the study were aimed at learning about rooming houses, the people who live in them and those who share the neighbourhood. The data and insights generated by this research will be used to assist the development of programs, policies or other initiatives geared towards improving rooming house accommodation. This is the particular thrust of the concluding recommendations to encourage "best practices". An important element of this research is its cooperative approach with land-lords, tenants, area residents and local busi-nesses which, it is hoped, will lead to the creation of strategic partnerships and enhanced information sharing.

1.3 History of the Study

Members of three inner city church-based organizations–St. Matthew's-Maryland, Augustine Oak Table and West Broadway Community Ministry–had long been involved in poverty issues in Winnipeg. In discussions, it had been noted that although there were a

a number of provincial and municipal programs aimed at housing, they were oriented towards home ownership. As a result, there was very little in place to improve the housing options of the very poorest residents.

Winnipeg journalist Mike Maunder had discussed this issue with the Institute of Urban Studies, suggesting a study should be done to explore rooming houses. However, in order to be eligible for Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance (WIRA) funding, Maunder would need to find community partners. In the end, both St. Matthew's-Maryland and the Spence Neighbourhood Association signed on as partners.

Community-based researchers, all rooming house residents, were employed throughout the study to gather information, speak to participants and to organize the workshop.

1.4   Project Management

With the St. Matthew's-Maryland and the Spence Neighbourhood Association acting as community partners, the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg represented the academic community. IUS staff members acted in a resource and supporting capacity. Mike Maunder coordinated research activities, finding community-based researchers to gather the data. Data entry and analysis, as well as the literature review, were undertaken by IUS staff.

The study was governed by a Steering Committee composed of: the research team (Maunder, Distasio and Dudley); the community-based research assistants; representatives from St. Matthew's-Maryland Community Ministry, the Spence Neighbourhood Association, West Broadway Neighbourhood Housing Resource Centre;

and a landlord and a caretaker. The Steering Committee met once a month between December and April and provided guidance to the research process.

1.5   Philosophical Approaches

The model of research promoted by CURA-WIRA differs from "traditional" scientific research in two important respects.

· **It is largely *qualitative* rather than *quantitative*:** it relies on the responses of individuals for its findings rather than raw numeric data. This means the findings are not really "reproducible"(meaning that if we were to speak to the same people again, some of their responses might well be different than they are at present). However, this model values the opinions and feelings of individuals. There would, in fact, be little hope of gaining a reasonably accurate picture of life in rooming houses without valuing the opinions, feelings and insights of those who live in them.

· **It is *constructivist* rather than *positivist*:** where "traditional" positivist science holds there is only one "absolute truth" or reality, and this reality can be measured through scientific means, constructivists believe there are many different "truths" and these truths are constructed collectively by individuals. By teaming researchers from universities and a wide range of 'walks of life", this study is "constructing" a portrait of the "realities" of rooming houses.

The means by which the study has been undertaken is recognized as "participatory

action research" or PAR. (Wadsworth 1998) There are two important elements that have guided this study: action and participation.

In the traditional form of research, the researcher starts with an hypothesis ("Rooming houses cause X"); fieldwork is done to gather data; the data is analyzed, and then a conclusion is drawn ("This proves rooming houses cause X"). The study is then completed; while other researchers are expected to learn from this work and incorporate it into their knowledge base, it isn't intended to address a certain social problem and fix it. This is a linear model.

In the new model however, a person or group of people, after reflecting on a problem, ask a question ("Can rooming houses be improved?"); they gather information through fieldwork; analyze the data; and this results in new action. It is a more cyclical model. Research undertaken this way is intended to attempt to change and improve the current situation from the outset. (adapted from Wadsworth 1998)

The other element, participation, is more complicated. There are always many different people involved in a study, and this one is no different. There are traditionally the researchers; those being researched; those who are paying to have the research done; and those who will benefit from the research. (*ibid*) However, the research team involved in this study has tried at every level to incorporate the participation of many different people (see Section 1.4, Project management, above). In addition, several of our community researchers are members of the population under study (i.e. rooming house tenants).

Community researchers and rooming house tenants : (l-r) Ray Despatis, Daniele Davis and John Jorgensen

It is important when working on a PAR study that it comes, like the WIRA slogan states, "from the grassroots up." In other words, the questions being asked and the answers being sought should come from the community. A "top-down" approach to PAR (driven by academic researchers) is not really participatory at all, and will likely result in failure. (Low, Shelley and O'Connor 2000) In fact, some of the literature suggests that for a truly PAR study to succeed, the "professional researcher, if one is present, plays only a complementary role as resource person" (quoted in Low et al 2000). This model is used in the present research.

1.6   Methods and Process

This study employed a combination of surveys, interviews and focus group work. It required the use of five research instruments, each aimed at a different audience. An initial

4

"low income housing" survey was conducted with 94 individuals in December 2001 (see **Section 3.2**). This was undertaken in order to gain a preliminary "snapshot" of the prevalence of rooming houses as a housing option for low-income people. The second instrument was administered to 38 rooming house tenants, and a slightly different form was used to survey 16 tenant/caretakers. As well, 15 landlords were interviewed in detail, with specific reference to the financial details of their properties (see Section 6). Finally, in order to gain some understanding of the ways in which rooming houses are regarded by the communities around them, residents in the study areas who lived in the vicinity of rooming houses were surveyed door-to-door.

1.7   Scope and Limitations

Although rooming houses are located all over the City of Winnipeg, this study is concentrated in the three inner-city neighbourhoods of West Broadway, Spence and Osborne Village. There are several main reasons why these neighbourhoods were chosen for the study: they fall within the boundaries determined by WIRA for inclusion in eligible projects; there are large numbers of rooming houses in each, and they all have active community-based organizations. As such, it should be borne in mind that this study is not attempting to draw a portrait of rooming houses in Winnipeg as a whole, but rather to provide a "snapshot" of a given area.

The study used a basic definition of what constitutes a rooming house–a house converted to rooms in which tenants share a washroom (although the City of Winnipeg has a rather broad definition: any single family home divided into three or more suites is a rooming house). There are, of course, varying definitions in use in other cities, based upon the nature of the

accommodations (i.e., washrooms and kitchens in enclosed suites). The study was designed so participants were essentially allowed to self-identify through a description of their accommodations. A reason for this is many of the buildings described by respondents had a variety of suite styles–i.e, a mix of fully enclosed apartments and single rooms in the same house.

The very nature of rooming houses and the socio-economic circumstances with which they are associated placed a number of limitations on the project. Many of the residents can be described as being "vulnerable"—that is, living on social assistance or disability allowances, and/or suffering from some degree of mental illness. As is explained in the social science literature, there are a number of difficulties associated with trying to access vulnerable populations to participate in research: it is not only difficult locating such people in the first place (social assistance restrictions prevent many rooming house tenants from having access to telephones), but their circumstances may prevent them from participating over the course of the study. (Anderson and Hatton 2000) Also, the academic community, through its ethics committee, places restrictions on going door-to-door in our inner city neighbourhoods because of its perceived danger. The research team did not feel it appropriate to advertise or put out a call for participants, nor was it possible to contact people randomly. Therefore, identifying participants based on the nature of their housing was almost always the result of personal acquaintance on the part of the community researcher assistants hired for the study; yet a strength of the study was the researchers gathering this information and conducting interviews are rooming house residents.

In general, then, the reader should keep in mind the theoretical foundations set out in Section 1.5. The approaches taken in CURA-WIRA projects account for the different ways participants "know" the world and collectively construct reality, but there are difficulties and considerations affecting the project that would not be present in more "traditional" forms of research. Yet the findings here are intended to be more important for their ability to affect change, rather than for their "scientific" value.

1.8 Study Area: the Spence, West Broadway, St.Matthew's, River-Osborne and McMillan Neighbourhoods

As Winnipeg continues its trend of slow growth (growing only 0.2% between 1996 and 2001, and 0.5% between 1991 and 1996), some of its older neighbourhoods have not fared well. One city official suggested it was the combination of large houses and declining economy that creates the condition for rooming houses. Indeed, the Spence neighbourhood experienced a huge 19% drop in its population between 1991 and 1996; the latter census period saw two out of three people move out of the neighbourhood. (SNA, 2001, p. 3) West Broadway, also saw a decline in population, but it was much smaller at close to 5%; St. Matthew's decrease was 0.4%. McMillan and River-Osborne neighbourhoods, on the other hand, both saw limited increases of 3.6% and 1.7% respectively. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

A demographic examination by age also reveals interesting differences between the neighbourhoods in the study area. The City of Winnipeg as a whole has 32% of its population between the ages 20 to 39, followed by 27% of the population between 0 to 19 years of age. The neighbourhoods of

Spence, West Broadway, and St. Matthews all follow this trend. However, the McMillan and River-Osborne neighbourhoods have the second largest proportion of their residents between the ages of 40 to 59. This indicates there is a comparatively older resident base in the McMillan and River-Osborne neighbourhoods, whereas Spence, West Broadwa, and St. Matthew's have a younger population base overall. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

The target neighbourhoods, with regards to household size and type, diverge from Winnipeg's basic trend. Each of the target neighbourhoods' most common household size are one person households. West Broadway has the highest percentage of one person households at 64%, while St. Matthew's has the lowest of the target neighbourhoods at 38%. These figures are quite significantly larger than the percentage for the City of Winnipeg at 29%. In terms of household type all of the target neighbourhoods, with the exception of St. Matthew's, have non-family households as their most common household type with percentages ranging from 52% to 75%.The St. Matthew's neighbourhood has 45% of people living in non-family household, slightly less than the proportion of people living in one-family households in that neighbourhood. Yet St. Matthew's still has a larger proportion of people living in non-family households than the total proportion for the City of Winnipeg at 35%. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

Average household incomes in these neighbourhoods were at least $18,000 below the City of Winnipeg's average ($44,937). The notable exception was McMillan, where the average household income is $39,129, approximately only $6,000 below the Winnipeg average. However, all target neighbourhoods had a lower average

household income than Winnipeg. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

In the case of the target neighbourhoods the incidence of low income for economic families range between 23.3% in McMillan to 70.8% in West Broadway, while Winnipeg's incidence of low income for the same category is 19.4%. For unattached individuals all of the target neighbourhoods are, again, above Winnipeg (49.1%), except for McMillan (44.8%). The incidence of low income for private households are between 33.8% (McMillan) and 76.6% (West Broadway) for the target neighbourhoods, compared to 24.3% for the City of Winnipeg. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

Between 1991 and 1996 Winnipeg saw 43.9% of its residents move. However, of the target neighbourhoods St. Matthew's had the lowest proportion of movers at approximately 55%, and River-Osborne, the highest at approximately 78%. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

Within the target neighbourhoods, a correlation can also be seen between mobility rates and the most commonly found types of dwellings. Higher rates of mobility exist in neighbourhoods that also have a high proportion of residents living in apartment buildings. In comparison, the target neighbourhoods with the lowest mobility rates have the highest proportion of their residents living in single-detached housing. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

The majority of dwellings in the target neighbourhoods tend to be rather old. The River-Osborne neighbourhood has the youngest housing of all the neighbourhoods with only 23% of its housing built before 1946. In total this neighbourhood has almost 70% of its housing built prior to 1971. On the other hand, West Broadway,

St.Matthew's, and McMillan respectively had 52.3%, 62.1%, and 55.7% of their dwellings constructed prior to 1946. In comparison Winnipeg had approximately 20% of its housing constructed before 1946. Many of the houses in the Spence neighbourhood are a hundred years old, built in the latter part of the 1890s and early 1900s. (SNA, 2001) Due to the age of the housing it is inevitable that maintenance and repairs will be required. For dwellings requiring regular maintenance only, each of the target neighbourhoods fell below the City's proportion (approximately 64%). Dwellings in need of minor repairs constitute approximately the same proportion for both Winnipeg and all of the target neighbourhoods, at approximately 27%. However, all of the target neighbourhoods had a higher proportion of dwellings requiring major repairs than Winnipeg did. The percentage for Winnipeg was 8.9%, whereas the target neighbourhoods ranged from 9.9% to 15.7%. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

Within these target neighbourhoods more people are renting their dwellings than owning them. With regards to housing tenure, the City of Winnipeg has 62% of its dwellings owned. Within the target neighbourhoods, St. Matthew's comes closest to this figure with only approximately 42% owned. All of the target neighbourhoods, with the exception of McMillan, have an average dwelling value below the city's average. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

People spending over 30% of their income on shelter costs are said to have an affordable housing problem. (CMHC, 1991) In Winnipeg, approximately 44% of tenants and 12% of owners do have an affordable housing problem. Within the neighbourhoods being discussed, each neighbourhood (again, except McMillan), had a larger affordable housing problem among tenant-occupied households than in the City of Winnipeg. A higher

proportion of owner-occupied households in each of the target neighbourhoods,(except River-Osborne) spend 30% or more of their household income on their shelter costs than the Winnipeg average. (City of Winnipeg, 1996) In terms of average rent the study neighbourhoods pay between $382 to $508 per month. The average rent for the City is $508. (City of Winnipeg, 1996)

1.9 The Numbers in Winnipeg

Rooming houses have always been an essential part of any city's housing–a place for young men beginning their work lives, a place for older men who have finished theirs. But the number of rooming houses in Winnipeg is far greater than the national average.

A nation-wide study of rooming houses (Starr Group 2000 - See Section 9) gives two reasons for this:

· **Demographics**: Winnipeg is home to 71,000 single persons, or 29.1% of the population (the national average is 27.5%). The growth in single-person households (6.0% from 1991 to 1996) was much higher than overall population growth for the city in the same period. Furthermore, 65.0% of singles live in poverty. This will lead to increased demand for single room occupancy.

· Low housing **prices**: Cheap Winnipeg homes (average=$86,838 in 1998) make buying homes for conversion to rooming houses more affordable and practical than in other cities. (Section 1.2) It should be further noted that property values in the inner city are well below $86,000 and in fact, many homes have sold for less than $20,000.

The Starr Group study, using the city's Rental Upgrades Program, identified 2,454 rooming houses in Winnipeg in 1997. These were defined as houses in which rooms were separated and tenants shared facilities such as kitchen or bath.

The CBC, in its radio documentary "Rooms for Rent" (CBC 1998), estimated at least 4,000 rooming houses in Winnipeg.

This discrepancy over the number of rooming houses goes back to the city's database. At one time, there have been as many as 5,000 rooming houses listed on the database. Rooming houses are defined by the city as any house divided into three or more units. When we phoned 30 owners on this database, it became clear that at least half the addresses we contacted were not rooming houses as commonly understood. As one irate "rooming house owner" told us when we phoned him: "I don't run a rooming house. My places are tri-plexes. A rooming house is a place where you have to walk down a long dark hallway to go to the can." As it happens, that is roughly the definition we had already come to accept for the study–a house with several rooms where tenants share a common bathroom.

When we contacted the city's rooming house licensing branch, officials said the current number has now been reduced to approximately 650 rooming houses licensed or in the process of being licensed. In our telephone survey of 30 owners, about half of these supposed rooming houses were not rooming houses. If this held true for the rooming house branch's estimate, the 650 rooming houses become 325. But, in one inner-city block where researchers knocked on doors, several rooming houses on the database had been condemned and closed, and twice that number were operating but not on the licensed list. This indicates how volatile the rooming house situation is, and how

difficult it is to get an actual count. Everyone contacted agreed there were large numbers of "illegal" rooming houses, i.e. rooming houses not on the licensed list. It was not the object of this study to do this kind of statistical research, but a rough count, taking the rooming house branch estimate of 650, eliminatingtri-plexes, eliminating houses that are closed, but adding those not on the list, would indicate that 1,000 actual rooming houses is much closer to the truth than 4,000.

1.10   Financial Numbers

Taking our conservative estimate of rooming houses in Winnipeg - 1,000 - and the estimate of owners and tenants that 70% of tenants are on social assistance, the public cost of rooming houses is considerable. A conservative estimate is that the average rooming house shelters five tenants. This means there are 5,000 tenants, 70% of whom are on social assistance–3,500 tenants.

The base shelter allowance paid by social assistance is $236 a month (although the province pays more in many cases). This extremely conservative estimate means the province is paying $826,000 in rents to rooming houses every month. The CBC program estimated this figure to be much higher, $6 million a month.

Using the most conservative measurements, we can estimate there are at least 1,000 rooming houses in Winnipeg, representing a minimum public expenditure of $825,000 each month, or just under $10 million a year.

Summary

The study of area neighbourhoods shows a divergence from the City of Winnipeg, including:

·   A common household size of one person;

·   An average household income (in most categories) below Winnipeg's average household income;

·   Fewer people living in single detached houses and more people living in apartment buildings;

·   A greater proportion of dwellings in older housing stock; and

·   The majority of the dwellings are rented, unlike in Winnipeg where the majority of dwellings are owned.

Our own analysis of rooming house numbers shows:

·   There are approximately 1,000 rooming houses in Winnipeg using the definition of a house with several rooms where tenants share a common bathroom; and

·   Social assistance pays approximately $825,000 in monthly rents to rooming houses.

Community Voices

The research in the following sections comes from the voices of community members. Their thoughts and feelings about living in rooming houses, and beside them, have been recorded by community researchers. These voices include owners, caretakers, local residents, businesses and city officials. During the course of this research, over 300 people gave their thoughts, feelings (good and bad), solutions and aspirations about the present and future role of rooming houses in their communities.

The first section discusses results gathered from local residents in five community drop-in centres. This is followed by discussions with rooming house tenants, caretakers and owners. The final two sections discuss community and business results and workshop findings.

2. Low Income Housing Realities

Survey of 94 Inner-City Residents

2.1 Introduction

In order to capture the realities of low-income people, the rooming house study began by talking to 94 low-income people about their current shelter arrangements. This survey included asking for positive and negative aspects of living in their current accommodation and general issues about the neighbourhood.

People were randomly selected from five inner-city drop-ins, places where many low income people regularly go for coffee, soup, conversation and a sense of fellowship. Two of the centres visited in the study were located in the Spence neighbourhood: the House of Opportunities (an employment-based drop-in), and St. Matthew's-Maryland drop-in. Two were in the West Broadway neighbourhood: West Broadway Community Ministry and the "soup line" at Agape Table. The fifth centre was located over the bridge in Osborne Village, at the Augustine Oak Table.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in late December (2001) by community researchers who were familiar faces in their neighbourhoods: Daniele Davis, a member of the Spence Neighbourhood Association; Ray Despatis, rooming house caretaker and community activist in West Broadway; John Jorgensen, a member of Augustine Oak Table; and Randy Ranville, a member of the West Broadway Neighbourhood Housing Resource Centre. Christina Jones, another community member and rooming house tenant provided valuable input and some of the photographs in this report. Daniele, Ray and John are all rooming house tenants and their experiences were vital to the success of this report.

Community residents had a high level of trust in these researchers, but even with this trust respondents did not like talking about income (30% declined). There were also several respondents who had had mental health or other issues in their lives who spoke about issues other than housing. Researchers often just listened with a sympathetic ear, but had no place to record the difficulties faced by these people.

> **Most people surveyed like living in the inner city; there was no sense of desperation about it. In fact, many talked about preferring the inner city to suburban living.**

Respondents were not chosen because they lived in rooming houses, but it turned out 37% of them did. As well, even though they might now be living in an apartment, 77% reported that, at one time, they had lived in a rooming house. Thus, rooming houses provide a necessary housing option for low-income single people.

The neighbourhood survey asked 19 questions. There were two positive themes that emerged — the role of affordable housing and the sense of neighbourhood that draws lower income people to the inner city. Two negative themes emerged — the poor physical condition of housing and difficulties posed by irresponsible tenants.

2.2 Positive Themes — Affordable Housing & Sense of Neighbourhood

The theme of affordable housing emerged in several questions: 23% of respondents said they live in the inner city because it's affordable; 27% said they stay in the inner city because it's affordable;. Affordability was a particularly strong theme, with 33% of respondents saying this was what they liked about rooming houses.

To understand the importance of affordable housing, it's necessary to understand the financial realities that surfaced in the survey. Approximately 70% of respondents chose to answer financial questions. Of those who did, 84% had incomes under $12,000. By far the largest number (66%) had incomes under $8,000. Of these respondents, 65% were on social assistance (either regular assistance or disability assistance); 12% were employed; the rest reported old age pensions, employment insurance and student loans as other sources of income.

The major challenge in obtaining accommodation is the shelter allowance, $285 for rent and utilities for a single person on disability assistance. Often, a rooming house is all a person can find for this amount. Anywhere from $250 to $285 is charged for a self-enclosed suite in a rooming house (sink, toilet, stove, fridge). More often, a person will

move into the "rooms" of a rooming house (shared bathroom and kitchen). In this case, their social assistance shelter allowance will be set at $236 a month, often paid directly to the landlord.

Given the range allowed by social assistance (for a single person, $236 to $285), finding affordable housing is clearly difficult. Yet rooming houses are an important part of the market, as it is in many cases, the only alternative for that price. The shelter allowance range of $236-$285 is, therefore, a major economic reason rooming houses exist as rental units in more traditional apartments tend to be higher.

The second positive theme was the sense of

place in the neighbourhood where they lived. Lower income people interviewed like living in the inner city — it's close to downtown, there are nearby shops and amenities and many of their friends live nearby. Other than being affordable, the most frequent responses to the question "Why do you choose to live in the neighbourhood in which you live?" were: location (33.6%) and community/ neighbours (14.3%). Similarly, 32% chose location and neighbours as what they liked most about their present accommodation; 26.9% said that's why they stay in the inner city.

In the end, most people surveyed like living in the inner city; there was no sense of desperation about it. In fact, many talked

Shortly after researchers completed their interviews, Winnipeg Free Press journalist Lindor Reynolds documented much the same conditions in a Wolseley apartment ("A Palace of Filth, Poverty — Mentally ill find housing a handicap," April 19, 2002). The tenant she visited was living in an apartment costing $276, quite a bit more than the $236 allocated for rooming house tenants.

about preferring the inner city to suburban living..

2.3   Negative Themes — Physical Condition & Irresponsible Tenants

Both of these positive themes — affordable housing and enjoying the neighbourhood — had a contradictory side, and these emerged as the major negative themes in the surveys — physical condition of their housing and relations with irresponsible tenants.

Accommodation in the inner city may be affordable for single people on a shelter allowance of $236-$285, but generally this means people get what they pay for. Poor maintenance and poor management was what 45% of respondents disliked about their present accommodation. When asked to suggest improvements, 46% suggested better maintenance. In talking about rooming houses, 16% identified poor maintenance as what they disliked.

When researchers met and exchanged stories shortly after conducting the surveys, the most vivid images were the physical conditions under which many low income people are now living in Winnipeg. Researchers heard about the difficulties tenants have in keeping comfortable as heating costs increase and rooms are kept colder; how the average sized room in a rooming house is too cramped; how shared bathrooms and kitchens are often unsanitary; how peeled linoleum and carpets smelling of a previous tenant's vomit made daily living unpleasant; and how a lack of repairs and maintenance - and slow responses by owners to complaints - made living in these units routinely frustrating.
"Owners...just don't care about what's going on in their houses," said one respondent. Once mice get in, they can take over; one man talked of mice running over his chest at night and popping out of his cereal box in the morning..

...one man talked of mice running over his chest at night and popping out of his cereal box in the morning.

And so, while being affordable is the big plus in inner city housing — whether in rooming houses, apartments or "palaces of filth and poverty" — the money provided is not enough for an adequate physical space and the ability to maintain it properly.

Although a strong sense of neighbourhood was one of the positive themes identified in the surveys, the reverse side — relations with irresponsible tenants, drinking, partying, lack of safety and privacy — was a major negative theme. "Bad tenants" were cited by 16% as what they disliked most about housing in the inner city; 12% wanted better security to improve housing. Many people talked of safety; insecurity; threats posed by other tenants who drank, did drugs, partied, kept other people awake and caused damages. One respondent listed noisy tenants as what he disliked most, but when he talked of his own frequent moves, it was because he was kicked out for being too noisy. "I was noisy then, but I've toned it down now," he explained in his interview.

It was in rooming houses — where tenants are in much closer quarters — that the theme of irresponsible tenants and the lack of safety and privacy emerged most strongly. When asked what they disliked most about rooming houses, 47% of respondents said the lack of privacy or bad tenants.

Lack of privacy and security is what sets rooming houses apart from other forms of low income housing. Even when tenants are

15

not disruptive, life in rooming houses is marked by a lack of privacy, a lack of mutual respect and a lack of taking responsibility. "People don't keep the bathroom clean," said one. "Someone keeps stealing the toilet paper." Another commented on the eviction rate: "We don't need a front door, we need a revolving door."

Although lower income people like their neighbourhoods in the inner city, life is often dominated by loud neighbours, evictions and slovenly conditions. Your best security is your isolation behind your own locked door.

The 94 persons who offered their thoughts and feelings presented researchers with a vivid glimpse of the life and times of low income individuals. They identified both positive and negative themes about life in the inner-city, flip-sides of the same coin.

Inner-city living offered affordability, but this often meant the accommodations were substandard.

Residents felt a positive sense of neighbourhood, but this could become negative when neighbours are drunk or party too much.

Summary

At the end of the survey, two questions asked respondents to suggest improvements for rooming houses and housing opportunities for low-income people. In total, there were 206 responses to the two questions.

The most common suggestions included:

1.   increasing assistance, which could be done through rent controls (50 responses);

2.   screening could be used to obtain better tenants (24 responses);

3.   maintenance subsidies could be offered to improve the physical condition of rooming houses (46 responses); and

4.   improvements to the poor safety and security of rooming houses (18 responses).

3. Interviews with Rooming House Tenants

"When you look around you know you're poor..."

3.1   Introduction

One of the most important components of this research were interviews. Conducted with residents and caretakers of rooming houses, 46 persons in total were interviewed. Each interview took more than an hour to complete and contained 40 questions (mostly open-ended) that delved into various aspects of living in a rooming house.

The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed for frequency and distribution. However, much of the content in the following sections is based on the interpretation and evaluation of the interviewers who reviewed the data in open-ended questions. Where possible, the voices of tenants are highlighted in quotations to ensure they are heard.

As one tenant researcher stated, "...many people may have said the conditions were adequate, but when you have not lived in better conditions, how do you know for sure?".

3.2 Review of the Findings

Tenant interviews were conducted during January and February, 2002. Seven community researchers (many of them rooming house tenants) were trained to conduct interviews with 38 tenants and 8 tenant/caretakers. Each participant was compensated with a twenty dollar gift certificate for their participation. Compensation was deemed important as the interviews tended to last approximately one hour. Following the completion of the surveys, it was decided to treat tenants and caretakers separately, given the distinct role each plays within the rooming house environment. Results for tenants are tabulated and summarized in the following section.

67% of tenants said it was the shelter allowance levels that contributed to their living in a rooming house.

3.3 Tenant Profiles

Of the tenants who were interviewed, 73% were male and 27% were female. Over 50% of the tenants were between the ages of 31 and 50, with 13% of tenants being over 50 years of age. Almost half of the tenants lived in rooming houses in the Spence/St. Matthews neighbourhoods.

Approximately 70% of tenants surveyed receive their income from some type of social assistance. The maximum shelter allowance provided to a single person residing in a rooming house is $236. The survey results found that 72.5% of tenants paid more than the $236 shelter allowance payment. This means tenants on assistance often have to supplement the monthly rent by using money that would normally go towards other necessities. In fact, some tenants on assistance can be paying upwards of $40 extra per month in order to bridge the gap between the shelter allowance and the actual rent.

3.4 Comments on Shelter Allowance

Twenty-seven tenants on assistance provided comments about their shelter allowance. The most important comments were related to the fact that the "...amount of shelter allowance makes it necessary for me to live in a rooming house..." (67%) while 41% indicated that "Have to use food money to make up rent." (Food money is used to supplement the difference between the allowable $236 and the rent being charged).

Many said they make up for higher rent by using food banks and soup lines. It was also noted that a social assistance worker has the arbitrary ability to grant about $40 extra for additional shelter allowance. In addition to shelter, a single person gets about $40 a week for all other costs. Therefore, even a small difference in the rent will have an immense effect on the lives of those living in rooming houses and accessing assistance. " I have to pay an extra $14.00 out of my own pocket [for rent] and that stinks!" is how one tenant described the problem. Another said their "...food budget is reduced by over $20.00 to make-up the rest of the rent." The most striking issue was the fact that 67% of tenants said it was the shelter allowance levels that contributed to their living in a rooming house.

Table 3.1	
Best Thing about a Rooming House	
Best Things	**Percentage**
Affordability	34.1%
Neighbours, friends, family nearby	31.7%
There is nothing good, don't like it	9.8%
Other	7.3%
Adequate privacy	4.9%
Single responses: safety, security, Room size, easy to find, clean, quiet	12.0%

Table 3.2	
Worst Aspects of Living in a Rooming House	
Worst Things	**Percentage**
Sharing, lack of privacy, dealing with Other tenants, conflicts	40.8%
Noise, rowdiness, parties	14.8%
Dirty, having to clean	9.3%
Can't think of any worst things	7.4%
Lack of security	7.4%
Small size	5.6%
Lack of utilities, services	5.6%
Drugs, alcohol	3.7%

3.5   Best and Worst Aspects of Living in a Rooming House and Why Tenants Choose to Live in One

Tenants were asked to consider the most important aspects of living in a rooming house(both positive and negative). The results pointed to a number of key findings, including affordability and issues related to problems with tenants.

3.6   Best Thing About a Rooming House

The most important consideration for living in a rooming was their affordability (Table 3.1). As one tenant said"...it's a place to live. Where else can I go that's cheap....back to the Main Street Project?". Equally important were the relationships with nearby family and friends. This factor was related to the importance of location, especially the proximity to family and nearby services. Many responses echoed the simple things people liked about their accommodations. One tenant felt that "...people respect your privacy when you want to be alone..they don't bang on the door looking for cigarettes." Other tenants appeared indifferent about their

situation and found nothing good about rooming houses. "Being a professional who made a few financial mistakes, there is nothing good about rooming houses in general, heard a lot of horror stories, but basic needs are met....it's not the Hilton."

3.7   Worst Thing About a Rooming House

One tenant gave perhaps one of the deepest responses to this question in all the interviews: "When you look around, you know you are poor. The psychological impact is depressing - you know you're close to rock bottom." This comment reinforces the sense of harshness rooming houses can have. The majority of negative comments captured a wide range of issues (Table 3.2), most pointing to the lack of common and personal spaces in most rooming houses. For instance, it is clear the most important issues were related to sharing (amenities and such), lack of privacy, dealing with other tenants and conflicts (40.8%). Another key issue was related to the noise and parties. Surprisingly, only 5.6% noted the small size of the rooms was a major issue. Responses to this question help better illustrate the inherent difficulties facing people

who live in sometimes crowded and dirty conditions. One tenant felt the worst aspect of a rooming house was "...the shape of some places, how neglected they let them get – it's the little things like you only get hot water because the cold water does not work and mice, lots of mice." Another tenant felt it was the state of the bathroom noting it is "...hard to share with people who don't clean up after themselves and the walls are covered in graffiti and shower stall is full of mold." One tenant summed up the negative aspects of crowded rooming houses by stating "...dealing with the same people everyday, they get annoying."

3.8   Explain Your Reason For Living in a Rooming House

Given the negative comments about rooming houses, tenants were asked why they chose their present accommodation. As previously noted, the survey of 94 low-income people clearly established that affordability/ financial realities as the major consideration for choosing their present housing. This was further substantiated by

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It is strongly felt that reducing the number of tenants per bathroom is one way to make life better for tenants, and to do this the ratio should be no more than 4 tenants per bathroom. This seemed to be an appropriate average and allows a greater quality of life.

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the responses of rooming house tenants. It is widely felt there is an "industry of poverty" in Winnipeg, consisting of soup lines, food banks—and rooming houses.

Quite simply, the large number of rooming houses in Winnipeg are in response to the $236 shelter allowance allowed a single person living in shared accommodation.

3.9   Physical Aspects of Rooming Houses

Tenants were asked to provide specific details on their living conditions—about bathrooms, kitchens, shared facilities and rooms. After each open-ended question, tenants were asked to rate their satisfaction.

3.10   Notes on Satisfaction Levels

Tenants on the steering committee and tenants who considered these satisfaction levels during the March workshop unanimously believed these "satisfaction levels" are too subjective to be useful. To illustrate, if one were to ask two rooming house tenants and two multimillionaires for their satisfaction levels, one might get exactly the same response. It would reveal nothing except the rooming house tenants are used to living in whatever conditions they're living, and so are the multimillionaires. A tenant suggested at the workshop that a more useful question might have been: "If you had more money to spend on housing, what would your level of satisfaction be with your present accommodation?" This section did, however, reveal the area of least satisfaction was with the bathrooms.

3.11 Size, Number of Rooms, Washrooms

The survey identified 35 rooming houses subsequently placed into four descriptive categories: Mega, (over 15 tenants); Large (10-14 tenants); Medium (7-9 tenants); and Small (5-6 tenants). Some responses were eliminated because it was determined tenants misunderstood the questions, or there was interviewer error in explaining the questions. Table 3.3, classifies four types of rooming

houses. The sizes identified ranged from five to six tenants to over 15. The majority of houses contained five to nine tenants.

A key aspect of the questions related to the size of the house was to obtain the number of bathrooms contained in each rooming house.

From this data, a bathroom ratio was developed. The average number for most rooming houses was approximately four tenants to one bathroom. There were 11 rooming houses where six tenants or more were expected to share one bathroom. Almost all of the high-use bathrooms noted were found in large rooming houses.

Table 3.3 Types and Size of Rooming Houses (Classified by 34 Tenants in Survey)		
House Description	**Total Number of Houses**	**Housing Accommodations**

MEGA
 	
Over 15 tenants
	2	(1 house) 20 suites:
		      14 single rooms
		      6 self-contained suites
		(1 house) Mini-apartment 19 suites:
		      10 are self-contained

LARGE
 	
10-14 tenants
	13	(8 houses) Houses with single rooms only
		(2 houses) Single rooms plus a few self-contained suites
		(3 houses) Mini-apartment:
		      more than half self-contained
		      2 houses have hot plates only, no kitchen

MEDIUM 7-9 tenants	8	(5 houses) Houses with single rooms only (3houses) Mix of single rooms and self-contained suites
SMALL 5-6 tenants	12	(5 houses) Houses with single rooms only (7 houses) Single rooms: 1 self-contained suite (caretaker or owner)

Mega House

Medium House

3.12   Description of Room/Suite

When asked to describe their room/suite, the most common responses included the suites being too cold or dirty, that had broken furniture or were infested. Some felt more positive and noted their room was adequate, safe and secure.

Many of the responses were contradictory — some praised cleanliness, cable TV and good furniture, while an equal number complained of cramped dirty rooms and unsafe conditions. Whichever predominated, tenants saw their room as their only space, "...a place," one woman said in the later workshop, "where you can put on a pink light and listen to Beethoven's Ninth." However, just as often, the light is burnt out and there's a gang of friends next door listening to rock radio and drinking beer.

Rooming House Room

Along with open-ended room descriptions, tenants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction based on whether they were *Very Satisfied, Moderately Satisfied, Moderately Unsatisfied, Very Unsatisfied.* In total, nine questions asked how people felt about various aspects of the rooming house including room size, condition, heating, shared facilities, noise, safety and tenant relationships.

In terms of satisfaction with room size, the majority (73.7%) were either very or moderately satisfied with their rooms. This was compared to the 26.4% who were unsatisfied. The level of satisfaction dropped slightly when asked about overall room condition as 71% said they were very or moderately satisfied. Heating and air quality had the lowest rating of the questions related to the room with 65% being either very or moderately satisfied while 35% were unsatisfied.

Rooming House Room

3.13   Description of Shared Facilities

When asked to describe shared facilities (bathrooms, kitchens and common spaces), equal numbers of respondents felt they were either clean (28%) or they were dirty (28%)–indicating the difficulty with subjective impressions from individuals who may have never known other accommodations to compare to their current situation. Others cited lack of prompt maintenance, and malfunctioning toilets and appliances as being situations they encountered on an all too

regular basis. No topic in the interviews aroused as much passion as did the state of bathrooms. According to participants, owners do not often provide toilet paper and tenants don't either. When newspaper is used repeatedly as a substitute, toilets routinely overflow. One tenant said he knew each morning whether or not he could use the toilet if he saw water flowing out under the

Rooming House Bathroom

door. Another said she "...cleaned the bathtub every time before I use it because I'm grossed out by the thought of other people bathing." People talked of not being able to get into the bathroom because other tenants were passed out inside, and bath tubs leaking into the room below. It seems the washroom is the real flashpoint of people's relationships with one another. One can avoid using the kitchen or sharing in the hallway, but everyone uses the bathroom.

Following the open-ended questions, tenants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the bathroom, kitchen and general cleanliness on a general satisfaction scale. As was the case in open-ended questions, bathrooms received the lowest satisfaction rating as nearly half of

the tenants (49%) were very or moderately unsatisfied with the bathroom.

The kitchen rated higher, with 68% being very or moderately satisfied and 32% being unsatisfied. When asked about the overall

Rooming House Kitchen

shared facilities, 58% were very or moderately satisfied while 42% indicated that they were either very or moderately unsatisfied. Overall, positive satisfaction ratings were higher than negative ratings in all nine questions. This result was surprising given the negative tone recorded in the open-ended questions. The reason for these higher than expected ratings were reviewed in the focus group, where it was said perhaps people are satisfied with various components of their accommodation because many have not lived in better conditions or, that compared to previous places (such as shelters), rooming houses are better. In the end, it is unclear why these ratings were positive when compared to other data collected.

3.14   Description of How the Manager Manages the House

When asked how the landlord manages the house, relatively more tenants (30.6%) reported there was a live-in caretaker while nearly 20% indicated there were regular visits by the manager; and 16% said the manager either visits only to get the rent or hardly at

all. Tenants were also unhappy about slow response times to requests for repairs. They seemed most happy in smaller rooming houses where there was a live-in caretaker or owner. "If the owner lives here, he takes care of his house" was how one person phrased it.

Tenants also rated their satisfaction with various elements of house management. Seventy-four percent of respondents were either very or moderately satisfied with general maintenance, while 26% were either very or moderately unsatisfied. This question was followed by asking whether tenants were happy about the response time for dealing with complaints. The results were almost identical to the general maintenance question (73% positive and 27% negative). There was a slight change when asked if management dealt with rowdy tenants as 71% were very or moderately satisfied while 29% were very or moderately unsatisfied.

3.15   Description of Other Tenants, Relationships, Safety

The contradiction between good and bad responses was most clear in questions about relationships with other tenants. In the best cases, some tenants talked of finding richness in rooming houses through sharing (one discussed people leaving extra food for others). Some characteristics of tenants in sociable houses included: "...we're all about the same age and know each other pretty well," and "...some blare their music, but mostly they're considerate of other people."

Tenants were also asked to describe the relationships within the rooming house. This raised a number of important issues. One tenant described relationships with others as "...pretty good....we bump into each other in the kitchen and end up talking. But most problems are with the friends they invite over". Another 15% indicated there were scary tenants and visitors while nearly 20% had problems with the excessive noise and parties.

In contrast, 25% of tenants indicated they felt safe, secure and got along with others. For the most part, life in a rooming house is a mix of events, some being positive while others are more problematic in nature. This divergence was summed up by one tenant who felt there are "...a few guys who like to drink, blare music but most are considerate of each other's lifestyles." This sentiment was followed-up by another tenant who felt the rooming house was "...very quiet place, maybe one fellow has his Friday night, comes home belligerent but goes to sleep."

The final set of questions in this section had tenants rate their satisfaction with relationships between tenants, noise and safety. When asked about relationships between tenants, 86.5% of tenants indicated they were always or usually satisfied while 13.5% were unsatisfied.

Standing in contrast to the stereotype of the noisy, dangerous rooming house, 74% reported being always or usually satisfied with noise levels, while 26% were to some degree unsatisfied. Safety was similarly rated with 71% always or usually satisfied and 29% usually or always unsatisfied.

> *One tenant described relationships with others as "...pretty good....we bump into each other in the kitchen and end up talking. But most problems are with the friends they invite over".*

3.16 Estimate Percentage of "At-risk" or "Hard-to-live-with" Tenants in Your Rooming House

The perception that rooming houses cater to a "tough crowd" is difficult to substantiate through the data generated. A question on the survey tried to approach this subject by asking tenants to estimate, as best they could, the *percentage* of 'hard-to-house' tenants. This question was introduced by defining 'hard-to-house' as persons who exhibit violent behaviour, substance abuse problems, mental health issues or simply persons difficult to live with. Although some of these terms may seem harsh, they were seen as a way to communicate the nature of the question with tenants. The results were somewhat mixed, with 33% indicating they felt that 20% or less were hard to house, while 30% felt it was between 50-80% of tenants. Only 15% felt the figure was higher than 80% of tenants who were hard to house and 22% said they did not know.

When asked what could be done to make life better in dealing with 'hard-to-house tenants' suggestions ranged widely. Overall, there were 30 responses to this question but 30% indicated they could not offer any ideas. Suggestions offered included: improving communication, having more visits from case workers and evicting tenants.

There appeared to be two main thoughts in dealing with hard to house tenants – making them responsible for their actions or having the necessary supports in place to help them. To the second point, many tenants felt there was inadequate outreach to help those most in need, with one tenant saying "...somebody should advocate our rights as tenants. Better monitoring of medication for tenants with health problems."

From the responses recorded, it appears many tenants feel the system has broken down. Too many people are filtering through the mental health care system and ending up in rooming houses. When such people hit bottom, there are limited resources available to deal with the outcome, and as one tenant put it "I can't change their habits."

3.17 Rooming House Associations

The prospect of establishing a rooming house association was presented within the context of associations for both tenants and owners. The phrasing of the question sought to gain an understanding of whether or not setting standards, creating registries, settling disputes and providing training would be positive.

In general, the majority of respondents (over 60%) felt it was a good idea to have both tenant and owner associations.

However, there were mixed opinions on the registry aspect. Many felt it may be invasive to give owners too much information about tenants and such a system may be biased in favour of the owners. Many who offered deeper thoughts on this question pointed to the sharing of information as being potentially good or bad – some felt knowing who the bad tenants are would help stabilize the house while others felt this may be going too far. One person believed an owner association would be a good way to "...share information about what works and what doesn't..." while another felt a tenants' association would be a "...good idea – as it is now, we have no way to have anybody listen to us...we have a problem."

Summary

In total, tenants were asked just over 40 questions related to many facets of life in a rooming house. Of the forty plus questions, seven asked tenants for specific suggestions, innovative practices, changes and improvements. Each of the 38 tenants answered with at least two and up to 11 suggestions relating to the seven questions. Their suggestions have been consolidated according to themes that emerged from their answers, including:

1.   Tenant Relationships/Rules/Standards
2.   Develop Landlord Responsibilities/Standards
3.   Physical Improvements
4.   More Supports from Government (Financial Reality/ Affordability)
5.   Women's Rooming House
6.   Tenants' Association

These six themes point to the importance of relationships within the rooming house. Tenants, owners and caretakers must all work together to ensure rooming houses are well-run.

However, there must also be support to develop better rooming houses. Many said the houses need to be fixed up but to do this government will have to help. These themes are visited in the Best Practices section.

Reflections of a Community Reseacher

John Jorgensen provided his comments related to his experience working on the surveys and living in a rooming house.

"When I first was approached about beginning as a researcher in regards to a rooming house survey, I was skeptical at first. Why? Because I have lived in a rooming house for the last 11 years and at the time I didn't think I would go anywhere.

Well, after all the meetings not to mention the surveys, I found that there was a lot of misconceptions and falsehoods about rooming houses such as, we are all drunks, lazy, druggies, bums, untrustworthy, criminals and the list goes on. Well I take exception to that as I am none of the above and I don't think rooming house tenants should be thought of in that way.

Now on to the other things, first of all a Rooming House Tenants Association is a great idea but it will take a lot of work and we must have the interest of rooming house tenants if they want to see changes made.

Secondly, if a certain city official (if the rumors are true) wants to shut the rooming houses down then I have a question for him. Where will we live, are you going to put us up in hotels or are we going to have to find some really big boxes and live behind City Hall?

Now we all know that the security in a rooming house is at best inadequate in that when a tenant leaves, they sometimes don't return the keys and that usually leads to problems later on. People leave doors open and before you know it, you have a whole lot of people in your house that you don't know and could possibly lead to them busting your house apart and you getting unjustly blamed and then evicted.

O.K.! Now I start picking on the provincial government. Why is it that when a politician of the day says they are all for social justice and before you know it they forget all about it. Take for example the Tories were in power way back when and in their infinite wisdom(?) decided to take away our right to claim our rent and the cost of living leaving us with nothing except that they said that they were going to spread it over twelve months on our social assistance cheques. Hogwash, they cut our allowance down to the bare bones. Tried to get us on workfare (work for your $80 every two weeks). Now I ask you, is that fair? If you are looking for work, why will they not give us a bus pass? $80 doesn't get you very far nowadays.

It seems all governments are the same – wolves in sheep's clothing. They wear the mask to get elected, but once they're in power, the mask comes off.

In short if you feel you have been shafted by this or any past government (provincial). Write to the premier and let him know how you feel. If enough people do it maybe they won't take us for granted next time and will listen to what we have to say."

4. Interviews with Caretakers

4.1 Introduction

In many rooming houses, the caretaker is also a tenant. For their role, they might be paid $75 to $100 a month. Just as often, they are paid by getting a break on their rent (for example, they are given a $271 room for $236, maybe with a phone thrown in). There can be other perks — better furniture, extra money for odd jobs, a bonus at Christmas.

In January-February 2002, interviews with tenant/caretakers were conducted as part of the larger tenant survey.

The caretaker responses often seemed far more optimistic than those of regular tenants ("Everything's fine," "Very satisfied,"), perhaps because they generally had the best suite in the rooming house and considerably more control over their lives (see Table 4.4).

A similar dynamic became clear at the April 2002 workshop. One of the tenants participating was also the caretaker in his house. As the group worked on preparing its list of six priorities, he constantly seemed to be arguing from the owner's perspective. "You're in the wrong workshop," one participant called to him. "You're almost the same as an owner!"

In fact, it was for this reason the eight tenant/caretaker interviews were discussed separately. But they were also interviewed as part of the tenant survey, because they were tenants and thus answered the same questions as other tenants. In addition, they answered a special section of caretaker-only questions. Their responses form an important and essential bridge between tenants and owners.

4.2 Comparing Tenant to Caretaker Responses

For most questions in the tenant/caretaker interviews, caretakers gave essentially the same responses as tenants: description of

Figure 4.2

ages ranging from under 25 to 50 and over, with over half being between 31 and 50 years old.

Rooming house rents tend to vary from under $235 a month to over $280 a month. Rooming house tenants on social assistance, are paid $236 a month for rent. Of the tenants and caretakers interviewed 25% of tenants and 12.5% of caretakers were paying this amount in rent. Overall, a larger proportion of caretakers pay higher rents than tenants. This is shown in Table 4.3 where 37.5% of caretakers pay over $280 a month compared to only 16.8% of tenants.

Figure 4.1

rooms, support for tenants' association, etc. However in seven areas (particularly satisfaction levels), the answers of caretakers showed major differences from those of tenants. Given that only eight caretakers were included in the survey comparisons should be made cautiously. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 help conceptualize the unique demographic structure of both rooming house tenants and caretakers. Figure 4.1 illustrates that the majority of both tenants and caretakers were male. Figure 4.2 depicts the age breakdown of both tenants and caretakers. With regards to caretakers, all of them were above the age of 40. Tenants had a higher age variation with

Table 4.3 Rooming House Rents		
Rent	Percentage of Tenants	Percentage of Caretakers
Under $235	2.8%	
$236	25.0%	12.5%
$240 - $250	25.0%	12.5%
$255 - $275	30.7%	37.5%
Over $280	16.8%	37.5%

Based on 48 respondents, the average rent paid is $ 264

The majority of tenants (40.8%) and caretakers (62.5%) said the worst aspects of living in a rooming house were the sharing of amenities, lack of privacy, having to deal with other tenants and the conflicts that arise.

Tenants and caretakers differ in their estimates of "at-risk" or 'hard-to-live-with" tenants. This includes tenants with violent behaviours, alcohol and drug abuse problems, sniffing addictions and/or mental health issues. When asked what the approximate percentage of hard-to-house tenants, 77% of tenants estimated that it was over 20% while only 37% of caretakers estimated it was that high.

The tenant/caretaker survey included questions based on satisfaction levels of room/suite, shared facilities, other tenants, noise, safety and management. The results indicated that both tenants and caretakers had high satisfaction levels with respect to the above listed facilities, with caretakers generally showing a higher level of satisfaction (see Table 4.4)

> *The majority of tenants (40.8%) and caretakers (62.5%) said that the worst aspects of living in a rooming house were the sharing of amenities, lack of privacy, having to deal with other tenants and the conflicts that arise.*

Shared facilities had the lowest proportion of moderate to high satisfaction levels. Still, 51% and 58% of tenants were moderately to very satisfied with the shared bathrooms and the general cleanliness respectively. Tenant and caretaker respondents were usually or always satisfied with other tenants, noise and safety. For example, all caretakers who responded said they were usually or always satisfied with their relationship with the tenants and the noise levels in the house. Seven out of the eight caretakers interviewed (87.5%) said they were usually or always satisfied with safety levels. In comparison 71.1% of tenants were usually or always satisfied with safety. Although the number of caretakers interviewed were less than the number of tenants, the caretakers tended to be more satisfied with all facilities than the tenants.

4.3   Caretaker Only Questions

Caretakers offered a number of interesting thoughts on the condition, maintenance and general operation of rooming houses. When asked "How do you select tenants?" caretakers said either by themselves or in conjunction with the owner. Other methods of tenant selection were done by checking with police or social assistance. One caretaker said selection was a matter of "...trial and error; if people are

Table 4.4 Percentage of tenants and caretakers who responded that they were moderately to very satisfied with rooming house facilities		
Rooming House Facility	Percentage of Satisfied Tenants	Percentage of Satisfied Caretakers
Room/Suite		
Size	73.7%	75.0%
Condition	71.1%	87.5%
Heat/Air	65.8%	87.5%
Shared Facilities		
Shared bathroom	51.4%	60.0%*

drinking or doing drugs, they are evicted after a month."

A second key area for caretakers was providing a description of house rules (if they existed). To this, many caretakers cited such rules as: no gangs, no noise, no excessive drinking and no drugs. Perhaps the most important rule of all was keeping all doors locked. However, some noted there were no formal rules. In some rooming houses, rules are given to tenants when they move in and they are also posted in various areas of the house. Rules vary but their goal is the operation of a good rooming house. As rule nine states "We're making these rules for a smooth, quiet, safe and happy place to stay."

Another important area caretakers are responsible for is providing services, such as snow removal, general cleaning and maintenance. More serious maintenance issues are dealt with either by the landowner or by calling a professional. It appeared the extent of maintenance was highly dependant on the level of knowledge the caretaker possessed. Examples of general types of maintenance a caretaker would perform may include such areas as repairing a broken toilet, fixing a lock, changing a light bulb or minor painting.

Given they have close contact with tenants, caretakers also noted a number of tenuous situations that occurred with tenants. This included dealing with intoxicated persons, solving conflicts between tenants and dealing with rowdy tenants. To this point, caretakers felt these situations were quite stressful and dangerous.

Relationships between tenants and between owners and tenants have been singled out in this report as making important contributions to a successful rooming house. Interestingly, caretakers also noted the need for positive

relationships with owners. The next question asked caretakers what they desired to most improve their working environment. For the most part, responses were for money for repairs, replacement of items in the home or for simply painting the unit.

The caretakers of rooming houses said they are put into a tough situation when dealing with the concerns of both tenants and owners. In most cases, finding a balance is necessary to ensure the relationships work.

Examples of House Rules

1. No Drinking, parties, or use of drugs on the premises.

2. No pets or extra furniture allowed.

3. No use of kitchen after 11:00 p.m. Clean up the kitchen, dishes, ect. after each use.

4. Leave bathroom in a clean and sanitary condition. Turn off the lights after each use, and leave bathroom door in an open position.

5. Keep your room private (door closed at all times).

6. Ask for the vacuum to clean your room.

7. When leaving your room turn off all electrical appliances, fans, heaters and T.V.

8. No visitors after 11:00 p.m.

9. We're making these rules for a smooth, quiet, safe and happy place to stay.

Summary

Caretakers ended up with a different order of priorities when they gave their suggestions in the seven open-ended questions. More government support became the major theme they put forward, including several new suggestions, especially some related to job-training, that were not suggested by tenants. Their suggestions have been consolidated into four key themes:

- **More Supports from Government**
- **Tenant Relationships / Rules / Standards**
- **Physical Improvements**
- **Develop Landlord Responsibilities / Standards**

In terms of more support from government, more money and resources for shelter allowance was the most common response mentioned by caretakers. Caretakers also felt lower rents for stable tenants would reduce some of the problems that commonly exist in rooming houses. Increasing the room size and improving heat were the most frequent responses that caretakers provided in terms of physical improvements to rooming houses. Caretakers also said landlords needed to increase regular maintenance, make the rooming houses cleaner, improve mediation processes and improve follow-through with problems and problem tenants.

Reflections of a Community Researcher

Ray Despatis shares his many experiences with rooming houses.

"My name is Ray Despatis and I am a caretaker. But first let me give you a brief history of myself and how I got into rooming houses. I left home at a very young age and to get an apartment at that age was impossible. The first place I had was down in the USA. My boss who ran two rooming houses owned it. While on the road when we were going to be in one place for any length of time, instead of getting a hotel room we would get a cheap room in a house close to the Exhibition grounds. So as you can see I have spent a great deal of time living in rooming houses. I have seen them all. The really good ones to the dumps from one end of Canada to the other, all through the States and in European countries as well.

When I finally retired from the carnivals I got an apartment; however, I did not feel comfortable there. So I moved into where I am now.

Let me give you a brief history of the house and some of the changes that have happened to the house since I moved in and what it is like now. When I moved into the house it was a dump. So I had planned to stay there for only a month until I could find some thing better. During that time my room had been broken into by one of the other tenants. When I told the caretaker at the time he told me that it was not his problem. Shortly after this the caretaker was busted for some reason or another. The owner asked if I wanted the job. So I jumped at the opportunity.

What I did afterthat was to give all the tenants their walking papers. The owner thought that he had made a mistake in hiring me and thought I was crazy. However, when he saw what I was trying to do he left me alone.

Since then the house has gone from a party, drug, hooker, police convention environment to a clean, quiet, safe, friendly environment. One of the ways that I did this was to establish some basic house rules, they seem to work. This was sixteen years ago. Most of my tenants are long term they have been there from thirteen years to two years. Out of all the hard work that I have done and as good as the house is I still have one problem I can't seem to hold on to owners as well as I can tenants.

What I have also been doing is trying to find a way to improve the quality of the rooming house, however I was not able to do some of the things I wanted to do. When Mike [Maunder] asked me to take part in a rooming house study conducted through the Institute of Urban Studies Department of the U of W I jumped at the chance. My part of the study was to sit on an advisory board and talk to people in the West Broadway area to find out what they thought of rooming houses and what kind of changes they would like to see in their present living conditions. And why they choose to live in a rooming house. I add that the study not only covered the West Broadway area but the Spence and Osborne areas as well. During the course of this study I have learned quite a bit that I did not know. As a result of this there are a several of interesting projects happening. For example there is a project called The Manitoba Rooming House Association for owners and the Rooming House Tenants' Association. As for me, after 16 years in the same rooming house, I've moved two blocks into a new project being run by Winnipeg Housing Rehabilitation Corporation. They are designing an alternative model to rooming houses, using some of themes we found in this study.

5. Interviews with 15 Rooming House Owners

"You Get What You Pay For..."

5.1   Introduction

The perspective of rooming house owners was deemed essential to this research to move beyond the common stereotype that they are slum landlords making huge profits off the poorest of the poor. The realities of running a rooming house, as will be shown, offer little evidence of excessive profits.

What is more evident is that owners are becoming increasingly frustrated within the current policy environment, one which owners characterize as driven by cutbacks to social assistance and the health care system (particularly when dealing with persons with mental disabilities), resulting in patient care being offloaded onto rooming house owners.

Owners stress cutbacks have had the harmful effect of limiting their ability to operate at a level sufficient enough to provide adequate shelter to their tenants and to be profitable at the same time.

In total, the fifteen owners interviewed were responsible for sheltering an estimated 400 rooming house residents. The owners who participated in this research were identified through two processes:

· the personal contacts of members on the steering committee;
· and phone calls using part of the City of Winnipeg's rooming house database.

This database lists approximately 5,000 rooming houses, defined as any house divided into three or more units. This recruitment process was not without difficulties: one irate owner on the list told us: "I don't run a rooming house. My places are tri-plexes. A rooming house is a place where you have to walk down a long dark hallway to go to the can." As noted in Section 1, this is roughly the definition this research had already come to accept — a house with several rooms where tenants share a common bathroom.

One irate owner on the list told us when contacted "I don't run a rooming house. My places are triplexes. A rooming house is a place where you have to walk down a long dark hallway to go to the can."

Overall, rooming house stock is volatile, characteristic of the process of filtering, where properties begin a cycle of downgrading (both economic and usage) from single family ownership to multi-family rental and rooming house use. This cycle continues to grip the inner city where owner-to-renter ratios have displayed high fluctuations over the last few decades. This scenario has led to declining property values and the subsequent transition in occupancy types. Many owners of rooming houses have also felt the effects of this transition as property values have plummeted along with their investments. Unfortunately, this market suppression has lead to the

cannibalisation of the housing market where cheap homes have been purchased and, in some cases, shoddily renovated. The City of Winnipeg's building inspection force has worked diligently to inspect and close homes not meeting current code. However, many unscrupulous owners continue to operate in infringement of the codes and offer marginal accommodations.

It must be stressed that all owners who participated in this study are licenced and operating within the parameters of the law.

In the end, 15 owners were interviewed, most for about three-quarters of an hour. Some gave more detailed interviews which involved two or three visits to their offices and tours of rooming houses. All owners, those interviewed or those who declined to be interviewed, were firm that whatever they said "...wasn't going to make any difference." They emerged as men and women hardened by life experience ("Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted," read a sign in one of their offices).

Once they started talking, they were passionate and voluble — so much so it was impossible to limit their comments to the 17 questions on the form. Answers filled up the spaces between the lines and spilled onto the back of the pages. A passionate answer to a financial question would turn into a discussion of welfare problems and endless anecdotes, like the story of one owner: "I offered a welfare worker $500 to have her client move in with her own family for one month," he said. "I told her if she still

recommended him after that, I'd take him. She stomped out."

Their passionate responses and storytelling makes it difficult to analyse the owner data in a quantitative manner. Therefore, the following sections provide an evaluative review of the discussions.

5.2   Owner Profiles

Following a review of the data provided, we divided the fifteen owners into three broadly

interviewer noted, "...appears to be living in poverty and shares an understanding with his tenants." One single-home owner talked of a tenant with a nervous disorder who had been with him for over 20 years. The same owner told of another tenant who was given a key to use a set of weights in the basement, and then pawned everything in the owner's suite when he was gone.

Small and large rooming house operators are business people who chose rooming houses as an investment. They generally have a less

Table 5.1 Organization of Interviews			
Interviews	Category	Average Size of Rooming House	Total # of Tenants in Owned Houses
5	**SINGLE-HOME OWNER** Own a large single family home in the inner city and have divided up their home into rooms to earn some income	3-8 tenants	36
7	**SMALL OPERATOR** Bought 2-4 rooming houses and manage them themselves for investment	4-12 tenants	140
3	**BIG OPERATOR** Own, operate 5 or more Rooming houses	7-12 tenants	225

defined categories: single-home owners, small operators and big operators (Table 5.1). This breakdown points to the fact that owners are not a homogeneous lot — there are as many different kinds of owners, and different approaches, as there are tenants.

The smallest scale owner identified was the single-home owners who included a number of older people trying to supplement pensions –typical of the traditional boarding houses that have existed in the city ever since its founding. There was a little old Hungarian lady who had been living in the same home for 25 years. There was one retiree who, the

personal touch with their houses than single-home owners. But in interviews, several talked of visiting frequently, some doing their own repairs, some hiring caretakers and management firms. Many seem to have a love-hate relationship with tenants — they know them and are sympathetic to their problems, but have been burned many times. The notes gathered from interviews included stories of tenants at the bottom of society - tenants who have substance abuse problems or mental health issues, who are drug dealers and prostitutes. One owner spoke of another owner whose tenant, a gang member, threatened to kill him. One owner said the

worst tenant he had was a muscle-bound guy who told other tenants to get out of the way, he wanted to cook supper.

"These are the forgotten people," said one owner, "They shouldn't all be painted with the same brush. They're still here. They have hearts." More than one rooming house operator reported that tenants had taken up collections to buy them wedding gifts or Christmas presents. But generally, they had many more negative stories — cleaning up a room stained with faeces and vomit and filled with garbage after a tenant had skipped; tenants unscrewing light bulbs and smoke detectors to sell; tenants dying of old age alone in their rooms, forgotten by all.

> *"These are the forgotten people," said one owner, "They shouldn't all be painted with the same brush. They're still here. They have hearts."*

Perhaps one of the most revealing statistics in the profile of owners is that all of the 15 owners interviewed (except one) had been in the business for 12 or more years. There does not seem to be many new local investors moving into the rooming house business. In fact, two of the large owners who weren't interviewed are now selling off many of their houses. One owner who was interviewed had just completed selling the last of his four rooming houses and was getting out of the business for good. He had sold two properties to an "absentee owner" in Edmonton and watched the properties "go downhill very fast." Now the trashed properties are up for sale again. It seems it isn't only tenants who can trash a property.

Many owners mentioned they were aware of run-down rooming houses (not their own) and properties that were being run cheaply to make a profit: "Landlords buying houses, draining them and boarding them up." Several owners blamed this on absentee owners — owners living outside of Winnipeg (this could not be substantiated in this research).

5.3   Financial Realities

By far the most consistent theme among all owners was the importance of finances in running rooming houses. There have been changes over the last ten years that have greatly reduced their ability to make a profit running a rooming house. Three of the single-home owners were feeling worn down by the difficulties and have been trying to sell their places and get out for the last few years, but there have been no buyers. The problem is not just financial. Several talked of the personal toll of dealing with people's problems — "We're business people, not social workers," said one. Others talked of the poor regard in which rooming houses were held by government authorities and by the general public. "The city is trying to get rid of rooming houses," said one owner, "And community groups are trying to close them down, too."

It was hard to talk to owners and not get a sense of their frustration. When someone in any other line of work declares they are making a profit, they are regarded as good businesspeople. When rooming house owners make a profit, they're declared slum landlords. But rooming houses have to be a profitable investment if they are to remain a viable housing option.

In order to understand owner concerns about finances, it is necessary to understand some background into events of the late 1980s and early 1990s that owners felt fundamentally

changed the financial dynamics of rooming houses.

In the late 1980s, a number of big Fort Rouge houses along Gertrude Street began being converted into rooming houses. As the character of the neighbourhood began to change from old single-family homes to rooming houses, city politicians and officials became concerned. Political will to "do something" began to develop about rooming houses. Several things happened over the next ten years that fundamentally changed the finances of rooming houses. The city passed tougher regulations, especially fire standards. They created a rooming house task force of inspectors to investigate rooming houses on the database and respond to complaints about other rooming houses. Even though rooming house owners agreed with the standards, running a rooming house suddenly became more expensive.

"We used to have a nice house, nice floors, fridge, colour TV and carpet in every room. It used to be a beautiful building. Now we can't afford to do it that way"

In the early 1990s, the federal government began its war on the deficit, and senior levels of government began downloading costs. It was the era of cost-cutting everywhere — Filmon Fridays and reduced services. Two such cuts had significant impact on rooming houses: the social welfare teams that had helped tenants find better accommodation were phased out of existence; and the decision was made to cut the shelter allowance for anyone living in a shared facility from its level of $285, $271 or $250 (normal prices and shelter allowances at that time) to $236. Thus, by 1993, tougher standards were being enforced, a lean and mean city administration had cut supports for the most needy tenants and there was a drastic reduction in rents collected from welfare recipients. Welfare recipients also faced drastic cuts in their spending allowance at the same time. One owner remembers that before 1993, his tenants would have little knick-knacks and things like soap in their rooms. "After the welfare cuts, that all vanished," he said.

Many owners date the deterioration of rooming houses from that time. "We used to have a nice house, nice floors, fridge, colour TV and carpet in every room. It used to be a beautiful building. Now we can't afford to do it that way," said one. Another described how he used to have nice two-room suites for $280. With the welfare cuts, he had to convert them to one-room units, increasing density in the whole house. Another described how he used to have a common room with a TV, but the cuts made it necessary to convert that into another paying room. Each successive change greatly increased overall density and reduced the quality of life. For the most part, it was all for the sake of saving approximately $40.00 in shelter allowance.

Asked if it was harder or easier to run a profitable rooming house over the last ten years, 12 of the 15 owners said harder and two said it remained the same ("It's like a volcano," said one. "It's calm now, then it erupts."). Virtually all owners referred to the fact that social assistance rates have not increased since the 1993 cut, while other costs have gone up, especially heat and insurance. "The cost of repairs and materials keep going up but the rate of rent stays the same," said one owner.

One owner sarcastically criticized government for not consulting with rooming houses before the cuts were made. "If what they wanted to do was save money, we could have

saved a lot more," he said bitterly. "They could have cut the rate to $200 a month and we could have eliminated plumbing altogether by building outhouses in the backyard. Just let us know what you want and we can provide it."

Indeed, it seems in rooming houses as in life, financial realities prevail — you get what you pay for, and $236 will buy you a cramped room in a building that's getting increasingly rundown. "If no changes are made, this type of accommodation can only keep getting worse," said one owner. "On the other hand, if government agencies would be willing to help, this type of accommodation will improve, along with the way they are viewed by the general public."

5.4   Financial Realities of Operating a Rooming House

This report has consistently acknowledged that ensuring the profitability of rooming houses is essential – owners must be able to make a profit to ensure their financial viability while maintaining the highest quality of life possible for residents. There should be no difference in terms of legitimacy between rooming house rental profits and those accrued by more traditional rental accommodation. In general, rooming houses operate much like any other business – there are expenses to be paid and revenues to be generated. However, as one owner put it, "...making a go of things is tougher than it used to be." The objective of running a rooming house, like any other business, is to mitigate costs and maximize revenues.

Owners have also resorted to reconfiguring houses to maximize rental income. This is generally achieved by adding more rooms – through reducing room size or converting common space to rental spaces

5.5   Making it Work

The primary mechanism to generate revenue is through the rental income paid by tenants. Some projects may generate additional revenue through laundry, parking and late payment charges, but for the most part and especially in rooming houses, income is generated through the modest rents charged to tenants.

Another issue specific to rooming houses is that they do not have the internal diversity of apartment blocks, i.e., they don't have a mix of one, two and three bedroom units which generate a range of rents. Since rooming houses contain mostly small single rooms, rents are basically the same for all units. The exception would be in rooming houses with small, two room suites or more amenities such as a bathroom, TV or kitchen.

A fundamental financial constraint facing rooming houses is that they are geared primarily toward low income individuals, and rents must remain lower than those charged by more formal accommodations such as apartments. The lower rents charged by rooming houses require owners to keep operating costs in check or run the risk of accumulating monthly revenue shortfalls[1]. The problem with revenue shortfalls is that if they extend over a number of months, owners are forced to respond by increasing revenue

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[1]Occurs when there is an insufficient amount of income generated at the end of a month to cover all of the operating expenses.

to balance the operation's costs. This can be accomplished by either increasing rental income or cutting operating costs. Given that rental income is somewhat fixed (i.e., number of tenants and rent-controlled income), most owners resort to reducing the amount of capital reinvestment (maintenance, improvements and renovations). The result of this scenario is that properties tend to degrade quickly and a resident's quality of life suffers. Cutting expenses can be achieved through simple measures such as not providing toilet paper, to taking more drastic steps, such as lowering room temperatures in colder months to cutting back the frequency of cleaning common areas and the bathroom.

Owners have also resorted to reconfiguring houses to maximize rental income. This is generally achieved by adding more rooms – through reducing room size or converting common space to rental spaces. This measure has effectively reduced the quality of life of tenants, who often live in very small accommodations with no common areas. High density living also affects the relationships among tenants. It was strongly felt that increased density and crowded conditions contributes greatly to hostility between tenants.

The financial realities facing owners is that "you can only go so far" with increasing rents; although one owner suggested "...owners just have to learn to be less greedy." These contradictory comments are related to the fact that most rooming house tenants have limited resources and they simply can't pay more than the bare minimum. As explained in an earlier section of this report, some residents on social assistance, when faced with rent increases, have had to resort to using a portion of their food money to cover rent,sometimes subsidizing rents with as much as 25% of their monthly allowance. Although this may only amount to $20 or so dollars, when a

person gets $80 for the month, it cuts deeply into their quality of life.

Tables 5.2 and 5.3 (next page) provide examples of the estimated costs for two rooming houses, one carrying a mortgage and one without. Both examples point to the same result: there is profitability but this is based on 100% occupancy for the entire year (a level which many formal rental units can't readily accomplish).

Both examples incorporate data supplied from the owners who took part in the survey. Owner One illustrates the potential earnings of a medium sized rooming house. The profitability of the house is shown to be just under $11,000. However, this would be based on the house achieving 100% occupancy for the entire year. Within this example there also exists the possibility of increasing profits by cutting expenses. The most likely expense to be cut would be maintenance. In this example, if an owner did not invest any money on maintenance for a full year they would make another $4,000. For the most part, the other expenses would be fixed.

In the end, one rooming house owned outright could produce a net return of $15,000. On a monthly basis, it is most likely profits would range from under $500 to over $1000 depending on the vacancy rate and the amount of expenses.

In the second example, the size of the rooming house is slightly smaller and carries a mortgage (not uncommon). Here, the profits are reduced to just under $9,000 but could be increased to over $12,000 if no maintenance was undertaken. This would work out to a monthly profit of under $500 to perhaps just under $1000 (dependent on vacancy rates).

Table 5.2 – No Mortgage (Nine Room House)					
Monthly Operating Costs		Revenues		Gross Profit	
Property Taxes	$250	Rent (9 suites @ $264*)	$2376		
Building Insurance	$75				
Heating	$300				
Electricity	$250				
Water	$150				
Maintenance**	$350				
Cleaning Cost	$100				
Total Expenses	$1475	Total Monthly Revenue	$2376	$918	
Yearly Expenses	$17,700	Yearly Revenue***	$28,512	$10,812	

* $264 was the average rent as derived from the Tenant Survey
** Maintenance rates vary throughout the year
*** Assumes no vacancies in the rooming house for a given year

Table 5.3 -$40,000 Mortgage @ 8% Amortized Over 25 (8 Room House)					
Monthly Operating Costs		Revenues		Gross Profit	
Mortgage Payment	$308	Rent (8 @$264*)	$2112		
Property Taxes	$165				
Building Insurance	$75				
Heating	$250				
Electricity	$150				
Water	$100				
Maintenance**	$250				
Cleaning Cost	$75				
Total Expenses	$1373	Total Monthly Revenue	$2112	$739	
	$16,476	Yearly Revenue***	$25,344	$8868	

* $264 was the average rent as derived from the Tenant Survey
** Maintenance rates vary throughout the year
*** Assumes no vacancies in the rooming house for a given year

In both cases, the homes show a return on investment. However, what isn't displayed is the condition of the homes, the amenities available or the level of maintenance undertaken by the owner.

In any type of business, profits are sustained in the long term by providing good service and a good product. These two examples demonstrate that to run a viable rooming house operation, an owner would be required to own three or four houses and hope they have a low vacancy rates and minimal expenses. However, this is not often the case. Rooming houses tend to be places with transient populations: leases a re almost nonexistent. More likely, this type of accommodation offers month to month rents with very high turnover. Given this volatility, the chances of an owner maximizing profits would be minimal.

5.6   Issues Related to Maintenance

The running of any rental project requires ongoing maintenance to ensure internal systems are operational and safe. In discussions with owners, the majority felt ongoing maintenance is essential, but to save money, most owners undertake repairs themselves. Caretakers also play a vital role in mitigating costs as most are expected to be somewhat handy.

Many of the owners interviewed stressed preventative maintenance is essential. This included inspecting mechanical and electrical systems, keeping the house clean and exterminating vermin. But to make costly

"You can't let things go too far. The moment the voices start to rise, that's when my caretaker deals with it. As soon as you hear rat-tat-tat and there's more than one guy, you go to his room and call him out into the hallway and talk to him there, tell him he's got ten minutes to get his guys out of there."

repairs such as changing a furnace or boiler can cost thousands of dollars.

With high maintenance costs, the potential exists to "let things slide" from time to time. This scenario is not uncommon to any business where profit margins are so slim that the operation implodes. In the case of rooming houses, the implosion is the loss of not only affordable housing but housing that could (potentially at least) be decent and livable.

5.7   Tenants — The Good, The Bad, The Irresponsible

Owners were asked what their biggest headaches were and about the main factors contributing to running a successful rooming house. The main headaches were "Booze", "Guests" and "Damages". In other words, tenant problems appeared in 15 of   23 responses. But the reverse was also true — "Good tenants with good attitudes" and "Good relationships" — were the top factors in running a successful rooming house, appearing in 10 of 23 responses.

Speaking of tenants as headaches, one owner said: "It just takes one bad apple. Things can be good with seven tenants and then one sniffer can wreck it all." Tenants having guests over was a big issue because, although owners often felt they had some respect and responsibility from tenants, their guests could get out of control. One owner told of how a tenant's room had been trashed by his friends: "I tried to talk to him, about how this was his room, how he could kick people out before it got out of hand, but somehow, he treated it more like a hotel room — he didn't understand

how he could take responsibility for his room and stand up to his friends."

When tenants don't take responsibility for their space, several owners talked about the importance of an on-site caretaker — not for maintenance, but "preventative maintenance," as one owner called it: "You can't let things go too far. The moment the voices start to rise, that's when my caretaker deals with it. As soon as you hear rat-tat-tat and there's more than one guy, you go to his room and call him out into the hallway and talk to him there, tell him he's got ten minutes to get his guys out of there." Some owners emphasized house rules. "The main thing is no knifing, no cops," said one, listing his grounds for immediate eviction.

The best form of preventative maintenance was getting good tenants with good attitudes in the first place. The best way to do this, mentioned by several owners, is a personal interview. "You can tell in ten minutes what his attitude is," said one. Getting tenants with self-respect, to respect others and a have a sense of responsibility would solve most owner's problems.

One owner talked of how his house was stable now because he had managed to keep good tenants while getting rid of the bad. Because he only charged $150 for rent to tenants who had jobs, he had beaten the revolving door reality of most rooming houses. "Over the years, the good tenants have stayed and I've kicked out the bad tenants. It's built a general atmosphere. Here they take more responsibility. They see it's in their interest." In many rooming houses, almost the reverse happens — when a person

gets a bit ahead and begins moving out of poverty, they move out of rooming houses altogether and find an apartment. Thus rooming houses continue to be the form of revolving door in which all the worst tenants tend to accumulate.

And what can be done about "bad tenants", since everyone's solution seems to be finding good tenants? It never emerged directly in interviews, but between the lines, several owners alluded to rooming houses where bad tenants seemed to accumulate. No one wanted to take responsibility for these rooming houses. One community worker, whose agency kept a list of "good" rooming houses, was surprised to find one branch of her agency was recommending one landlord as "good" while another branch of the same agency refused to recommend clients there because of bad incidents in the past. Some owners talked of other owners who took tenants they would never consider. One owner came highly recommended by several tenants and agencies, but in another part of town, his houses were considered among the worst. It would be in keeping with the owners' feelings that "one bad apple spoils the lot". There could well be owners whokeep their best houses running well by making sure "bad" tenants are concentrated in other houses. One owner who runs what are considered by virtually everyone as good houses said even some tenants can be good at one time and bad at another. He referred to the practice of tenants moving from one house to another: "I want to know if he's at the top or the bottom of his cycle," said the owner.

Long-range ideas like larger rooms, two-room suites and common rooms are simply impossible under their present financial realities.

Getting more tenants with steady employment was one owner's suggestion. He said there was less damage in his houses where a majority of tenants worked. Several owners talked of a relationship between damages and tenants on social assistance. By far, the majority of tenants are on assistance — four owners said 100 % of their tenants were on assistance; three said 80 %; and five said 66 % to 75 %. There was a feeling from many owners that there are more people on welfare in rooming houses now than in the past.

The relationship between rooming houses, people on assistance and the lack of money to provide properly, either for the people or the houses, was a constant theme.

Several owners mentioned another change to welfare in the cost-cutting of the early 1990s. Social assistance stopped paying damage deposits. It used to be the city would pay half the first month's rent as a damage deposit. If the tenant did no damage, the deposit got transferred to his next place. Thus, if a tenant was transferring without the damage deposit, a landlord knew something was wrong. "The damage seemed to increase after the city stopped giving out the damage deposit," said one owner. "After that, if a tenant lost his key, what the heck, he'd just put his foot through the door."

Building a relationship with tenants was mentioned by several owners. "You have to like people," said one small operator. Another owner of a single home rooming house felt his presence was essential to the running of the house. Because he cleaned one of the bathrooms and the kitchen, other tenants took responsibility for cleaning the other washroom (all were long term tenants). In the opinion of several small and large operators, such relationships are much harder to come by. One owner said they were impossible. But another of the large operators visits his houses

every week, interviews prospective tenants and tries to keep working with them. Another owner, when asked, "What kind of communication process do you have with tenants once they've moved in with respect to problems?" replied "What kind of question is this?"

5.8   Physical Improvements

In their interviews, owners didn't place the same emphasis on repairs and maintenance as did tenants. Where tenants talked a lot about poor physical maintenance by owners who didn't care, owners emphasized damages by tenants who didn't care, and the financial limitations that made it impossible to keep things up. It's perhaps notable that during three interviews conducted in one owner's office phone calls came in about a broken boiler, a plumbing problem and another maintenance problem, and in each case, a maintenance worker was sent to deal with it immediately. Some owners are interested in protecting their investment.

But if, by some miracle, owners did have enough money to tackle physical improvements, they had definite ideas about what would work best. Many emphasized that giving tenants their best possible private space was the most important type of physical improvement — a good-sized room, colour TV, cable, providing linen, even down to the personal touch of one owner (a woman) who provided "a good comforter on every bed." Several owners would like to rent more self-contained rooms. "Then they're not dealing with each other on a constant basis," said one. Another echoed that view: "Putting money into a common room would be bad," he said. "It's better that each get a bigger room, TV, fridge. There's lots of hostility when people have to share." But a minority of owners felt it was important to have common spaces to help build relationships. "You can build more

suites, but solitary living is not always appropriate for everyone," said one. "It is essential to the success of a rooming house that tenants can live together harmoniously in this type of setting — so the tricky part is ensuring tenants are a good fit."

With physical improvements, most owners attempt to prioritize items. For example, the furnace has to be repaired when it breaks or the broken toilet takes priority over the hole in the wall. Long-range ideas like larger rooms, two-room suites and common rooms are simply impossible under their present financial realities.

5.9   Government Assistance

The financial realities most owners face are such that, unless government grants somehow became available, physical improvements are unlikely. If government grants became available rooming house owners, as their own breed of private businessmen, would regard them with suspicion, but many said they would take advantage of them. "Honest landlords could make application for improvements, and then have bills to show what was done," said one. "Grants could help get rid of absentee landlords," suggested another. If grants for repairs and upkeep were granted to responsible landlords, their properties would gradually become better and attract tenants.

But any grant program would have to overcome an inherent and general distrust of government and regulations on the part of rooming house owners. They all had lots of stories of poor relationships with government. Rooming house licences were "...just another way for the city to stick their hands in my pocket," said one owner. Many described frustration dealing with government — rental regulations that make it hard to get rid of bad tenants (a sentiment echoed by several tenants

as well); the city making them jump through hoops with standards; but, worst of all, their dealings with social assistance offices.

Owners were frustrated with social assistance ("no increases for nine years, but everything else has gone up,") and with social assistance workers they could never reach if there were problems with a tenant. "They never answer the phone, it's always a machine and they never return calls," said one. One told a story of a woman addict with a small child. He phoned her worker several times but never got an answer. Then one day, her boyfriend trashed the suite. When the owner came, the mother was stoned, the baby was on her own and the apartment was destroyed. "I took them both to welfare and demanded to see her worker," he said. "Here," he told the worker. "She's stoned, she's not taking care of the baby, and my apartment has $20,000 in damages. They're your problem, not mine."

Many owners felt there were at-risk tenants — bad drinkers, sniffers, mental health patients — who should get special care and more day-to-day supervision. "One tenant phoned me one day and I knew something was wrong," said one owner. "He damaged our place and went back to live with his mother. He damaged her place too. The government has failed these people." One owner said he's had several tenants get off the booze while they've lived with him. "You have some hope with the young ones," he said. "Cut them off if they don't attend AA. The older ones, you have to let die." He felt social workers needed to work more with borderline cases "...to help them get their heads above water — especially work incentive programs where they can keep what they earn." Several owners thought there might be some method of sweat equity — light housekeeping that could make tenants feel more a part of the house and give them more spending money."

Summary

The major theme from owners is the recognition that rooming houses are a business and a need to be profitable if they are to remain a viable housing option. Given the financial realities of the $236 shelter allowance, the only way owners can now make a profit is by running down the house. The steps government could take to change this for owners are:

1. A program of grants for physical improvements (eg. better safety, lower density bathroom ratio) which could improve the quality of life for tenants (and the quality of housing stock) at no cost to an owner's profit.

2. Making changes to social assistance which would restore shelter rates to the pre-1993 levels.

3. Increasing supports for at-risk tenants — special housing, supports in housing, treatment programs tied to residences, work incentive programs.

Additional ideas of benefit to owners are discussed in the "best practices" section.

Reflections of a Community Researcher

Daniele Davis, a rooming house tenant, shares her views.

"First, I would like to say that the experience of working with all involved in this project was enjoyable and appreciated. The fact that such a study was done, encouraged me in knowing that finally, people realized the importance of starting at the bottom when wanting to improve our inner cities and many of their residents' living conditions. The idea of having tenants doing the interviews and surveys was in itself one of the most positive aspects of this program. It also showed the people that trust could be established more easily since they realized that we understood where they were coming from.

As for the results I've seen so far, I have to admit that I was very surprised by them. I do not mean to question any of what was recorded by the Institute, but I did not expect such an overall positiveness from the tenants. I am not saying that the answers were not recorded as written, simply that I personally don't believe that so many residents are as satisfied as it is projected on the reports. We have already had some discussions on this subject at previous meetings but I would like to make sure that this point comes across to the people who will be viewing the report.

As for the reasons of such positiveness, I think that we should try to read between the lines, and explain some of the reasons why in the report. Here are some of my personal views for all of those "seemingly happy people". Many rooming house tenants are on social assistance, some for many years, and it is the only life they know, for whatever reasons. Their standards of living have always been minimal so they do not have the same expectations as many others do. Some others feel either ashamed or embarrassed of being a burden on society, and with reasons. We are all too quick at judging others and hearing negative opinions from all sides.

Myself included, until six years ago. For medical reasons, abusive relationships , mental breakdowns, loss of employment etc. people, who were once independent and in charge of their lives, become dependant on government's benefits which, for many, make them lose much of their self-esteem or what is left of it. Therefore, we say what right do we have to complain? Why would we say we're unsatisfied with our living conditions? In most times, we feel lucky enough to be alive!

Some other tenants, who were institutionalized for mental reasons or taken from their families at an early age to attend "residence schools", suddenly find themselves on their own, once they become adults or for lack of government funding. They are being housed in privately owned residences or other facilities with minimal supervision, where their lives are scheduled around medications and three daily meals. Others do the thinking and talking for them. Are they really satisfied with their accommodations, most times in crowded and noisy surroundings and always in the inner cities? Like many other rooming house residents, they feel or are powerless in voicing their true feelings or are afraid that their opinions will be viewed as unjustified complaints and will bring them negative responses from their caretakers, landlords, social workers and public opinion!

In no way, do I want to seem like I don't believe in the results or numbers put on the reports; I really believe that everybody involved in this research did so, with an open mind and neutrality. Hopefully, we will keep in touch through our community work or other projects. As you all know, things are in need of immediate changes regarding these types of accommodations , not only for the tenants, but also many owners who are trying to keep up with the maintenance of their properties but are unable to, because of the "freeze" on rent increase and lack of funding.

Maybe one of our objectives, now that the research is near an end, would be for all of us to keep in mind the need for improvement, be less judgmental and remember what somebody once said: "You don't need much to become humanitarians, all you need is to act as humans toward others."

6. Workshop Themes

6.1   Introduction

In April, 2002, a public workshop was held at the "Agape Table" in West Broadway. Participants from previous phases of the study, as well as other interested individuals, were involved. The purpose behind the works shop was two-fold: to present our findings to stakeholders and to obtain from them ideas, input and comments.

After the initial presentation of findings, the group was divided into two focus groups. Rather than summarize the findings of these groups individually, they have been collected in the order the questions were asked.

6.2　　　Workshop Questions

During the workshop, participants looked at the results of the tenant surveys, question by question. Their observations were as follows.

1. Why do we live in rooming houses?
- cheap rent
- no choice
- best option for the rent (money considerations)

2. Best things about rooming houses?
- cheap rent
- other single people
- security
- can make it a home, invite family over
- nothing

3. Worst things about rooming houses?
- lack of privacy space
- noise
- cleanliness depends on landlord
- shared washroom
- other tenants breaking things
- not enough space to invite people over
- no common space

4. Comments on Rent/Shelter Allowance
- need to use food money for rent
- social assistance rates are lower than costs
- working poor also choose rooming houses out of necessity
- if rates go up for social assistance, they will mean higher rents for working poor
- no leases, month to month
- rates could go as high as 67% of income
- no security, but also no commitment ·
- landlord could boot you out 24 hours, but must show cause

5. Suggestions on Rent/Shelter Allowance
- government supports should be available for all: housing should cost no more than 27% of income, and a subsidy should be available if paying more to benefit the working poor
- we should try to come up with a "reasonable number" for "ground rent" a subsidy could top up
- subsidies should also be available for landlords, as long as standards are in place to make sure money is used to lower rents (for those who are paying more than 25% of income on rent)

6. Comments on Satisfaction Levels
- comments in survey results (indicating much higher levels of satisfaction than were expected) may not account for psychological factors
- residents may not feel they deserve better- living off tax money, so no right to complain
- comments about cleanliness are also not certain: people have different tolerance levels and definitions for what is "clean" or "dirty". What are they satisfied with? That they have one bathroom or that they have to share one? That it's clean?
- if you call inspectors you might lose your room

7. Safety
- more attention on the part of owners and caretakers is needed to make rooming houses safer and cleaner
- a great need for more responsible behaviour on the part of tenants

8. Physical Standards

· inspectors need to focus on enforcing standards, not evicting
Too often, when ill-run houses are inspected by officials, the houses are condemned and closed. This, in effect, punishes tenants. A way needs to be found to enforce regulations without this happening

· reduce density of all shared facilities.
No more than 5 people should share a bathroom. This measure depends upon fewer tenants per home (while still remaining economically viable for the owner), or the installation of additional facilities

9. Suggested Facilities (difficult to maintain)

· need for common phone, like a single phone with long cord: but they get abused. Maybe a pay phone?

· parking area: But who would be responsible for its upkeep?

· common area with TV, chess.
Some feel if there is a trade off between common spaces and private ones, then they want larger private spaces.

· shared vehicles (car co-op): Would require further levels of cooperation, trust and responsibility

10. Renovations, repairs and construction

· government support needed for new low income housing construction

· follow up (was the wall fixed? Where are the receipts?)

· "sweat equity": tenants do some work to get better space, appliances

· landlord hires tenants to do repair, they get break in rent

· quid pro quo: Fix holes in wall and I'll fix something in your room

11. Special Supports for Special Tenants (group homes, special apartments)

· Many residents with physical and / or mental health problems would benefit from regular visits by a home care nurse.

· Other physical disabilities could be accommodated with "universal design" elements such as wheel chair ramps.

· *A "Buddy system"*
Tenants could watch out for others, walk them to the store, help around the house. Such an arrangement would increase levels of trust and safety among tenants.

12. Tenant Relationships

For many of the participants, the reason the rooming house became an unpleasant place to live was not so much the action or inaction of the landlord, but the behaviour of fellow tenants. Tenants said they would feel more "at home" if they had more control over who they livedwith. Some of the ideas to support this were:

· tenant participation in tenant selection, screening, and setting standards

- tenants and landlords work this out together
- a registry of problem tenants would alert owners to those who have caused serious problems in other houses
- establishing a tenant application procedure, with a form, an interview, references. Owners need to meet applicants.

13. Landlord-Tenants Association

This could take the form of a single body, or tenant group or groups meeting with an owners' group. The two groups could work separately on some issues, but together on others. It is important to know owners better. Such a group would need start-up money like a grant, but also long-term funding. At present though, the landlord lobby is pretty weak; also, many landlords are getting out of the business.

14. Other Issues

- vacancy rate for apartments in the city is at less than 1%
- relationships can be a benefit–but if you don't want to know anyone in the house, you can do that too.
- lots of isolation
- maintenance: space can be made into a home, hope space inside can change, needs to feel good to the person.

7. Community Perceptions Regarding Rooming Houses

7.1 Introduction

A vital part of this rooming house study was to gain an understanding of the community's perception towards rooming houses located in their neighbourhood. Local businesses and residents were surveyed about the condition, location and their general feelings about rooming houses in the inner city. This aspect of the research was undertaken in three neighbourhoods: Spence, Saint Matthews and West Broadway; thus the findings represent only the perceptions and feelings of those area residents and businesses.

The survey was designed to provide a brief snapshot of the community's perceptions and contained nine questions. The format of the questions consisted of yes/no and short, open-ended questions. A total of 159 respondents took part. Of these, 60% were residents and 40% were businesses. In terms of a neighbourhood breakdown, the survey included 50 residents and 36 businesses from Spence/St. Matthews and 46 residents and 23 from businesses in West Broadway.

It should be noted the data recovered was examined for variation between businesses and area residents; however, no significant statistical differences were observed. Therefore, the results are discussed by examining the cumulative responses (business and residents in one sample). The tabular results for each survey question are listed in the appendix.

The first question on the survey had respondents identify approximately how long they had lived or worked in the neighbourhood. Nearly half the sample consisted of persons who had been in the area for less than three years (47.6%) while 15% said they had been in the area between 4-7 years. Those indicating they have lived in the area for longer than eight years consisted of 37%. Overall, it was felt respondents had a good sense of the area's history and the role of rooming houses.

7.2   Survey Results

To begin, the survey asked the simple question — *Do you know what a rooming house is?* An overwhelming number of respondents (81.5%) said yes. The follow-up question then asked respondents to define a rooming house in their own words. The majority said rooming houses were places where people shared facilities, like bathrooms, kitchens, where tenants paid cheap rents, where houses had lots of rooms for rent and where houses were run-down. Overall, respondents provided a diverse range of definitions with one resident saying "...they were houses for single people." Another resident thought rooming houses "...were a house with more than ten people living there." Not all the thoughts were positive: one business surveyed

said they were "...buildings, that in my view, are in most cases, run down, not very clean, have dirty yards . . . but of course there are a few exceptions."

The second question asked respondents whether they knew anyone who lived in a rooming house – 48.6% listed they knew someone currently living in a rooming house. Furthermore, 53.5% said they could identify a rooming house on their street (Question 3). This question was quantified by having respondents state how they could identify rooming houses in the neighbourhood. Responses ranged from observing many people coming and going to homes with signs stating *rooms for rent*. Interestingly, many said they identified rooming houses by their rundown condition and by the numerous mailboxes or large fire escapes dominating back portions of homes. One person said they could a identify rooming house by "...the age and number of occupants which are beyond what usually constitutes a nuclear family."

Question Four of the survey asked respondents to consider if they felt rooming houses *affected* them in some way — 32% said they did. When asked to explain, many said it was the sight of increasing numbers of people walking around (drunk) or there were suspicious actions in the neighbourhood (drugs or drinking). Some also said that it was the physical condition of the units that affected them.

For the most part, area residents surveyed observed problems with rooming houses. They complained about the noise and increased traffic related to more people coming and going. One resident said "...there

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One Person felt they could identify a rooming house by "the age and number of occupants which are beyond what usually constitutes a nuclear family."

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was a lack of stability when there is a lot of change-over in neighbours..." while another remarked "...you always hear beer bottles in the shopping carts going by." There was a strong feeling, from those who felt affected by rooming houses, that drinking parties were a problem.

Question Five asked respondents how they felt about having rooming houses near them. The majority (46%) said they didn't care or had no problem with them. This was contrasted by 21% who did not like them in the neighbourhood. A number of respondents felt if the properties were well maintained, well managed and tenants were quiet and respectful, they would not have any problems with rooming houses in the area. One person commented "...it's not so much the houses but the people in them..." while another resident summed it up by saying "...the good ones are good, the bad ones are not good."

Question Seven of the survey sought to understand if respondents thought rooming houses had changed in some way during the time they had been in the neighbourhood. Of the responses, 27% felt rooming houses had changed for the better while 24% felt they had worsened. When asked to explain the reasons for their answers, the majority of respondents felt landlords were not maintaining properties or rooms were being rented to bad tenants. To this point, one resident said "...houses are owned by somebody who doesn't give a damn . . . who's there as long as they get their money...". Another resident said "...landlords don't care about having good tenants." In terms of positive comments, many said rooming houses had been renovated, there were fewer problems and that landlords were "

trying to work with the community to make improvements. One resident best summed up the dynamic nature of rooming houses by saying "...they were bad for a while, then good, then bad again, for now it's good."

Question Eight asked whether respondents considered the creation of an association between tenant and owners would be positive and 88.7% said it would be a good idea. This was important as all the surveys/focus groups in this research have indicated an association between tenants or tenants and owners would be a positive step in creating better rooming houses relationships.

The final question asked if there were any other comments about rooming houses. Although the majority of respondents had no comment, several pointed out rooming houses were important as they provided a last resort for many people who have no other choice. "I have no problem with rooming houses. Everybody should be able to live in something they can afford," said one resident. A number of other respondents said landlords needed to do more maintenance related to the upkeep of the homes. "Get good people to live in rooming houses..." was offered as a simple solution to the problem. A number of respondents further pointed to the necessity of building stronger links with the community. "Tenants and landlords should have a mutual understanding of what is required of them and what they're supposed to do." Perhaps one of the most powerful comments related to the relationship between rooming houses and community: "...a good idea would be to change the relationship from a simply financial transaction between

"A good idea would be to change the relationship from a simply financial transaction between landlords and tenants to what it actually is: a relationship that affects and involves the surrounding community."

landlords and tenants to what it
actually is: a relationship that affects
and involves the surrounding commu-
nity."

Summary

The following are some of the important issues discovered through the community surveys.

The community acknowledges rooming houses serve a purpose – most likely as a last resort. This demonstrates a willingness to see past current negative stereotypes and recognize rooming houses as a necessary component of the housing market. Part of this is due to the fact that almost half of respondents thought rooming house residents were not strangers, but someone known to them. Rooming house residents are seen by many as neighbours and friends.

A minority—21% of respondents—felt negative about the presence of rooming houses nearby. Yet the extent to which rooming houses are perceived by the community in a positive light appears to be dependent on the effort owners put into investing in their properties, and the efforts put into the greater community.

Many respondents pointed to the lack of maintenance and the disruptive influence rooming houses had on the neighbourhood. Yet most notable among the responses was the importance of building strong relationships between tenants, owners and the community. According to those surveyed, significant changes have taken place to improve rooming houses, especially by owners making more of a concerted effort to connect with the community. This appears to be a vital aspect of making rooming houses better places.

The results of the Community and Business Survey concur with other findings of this research. The literature review (Section 9) shows some practical ways that owner-community partnerships are encourage in other cities, including:

·   a registry system for roomers and boarders;
·   A Rooming House Information Centre;
·   a Rooming House Working Group (composed of landlords, tenants, members of the public and representatives from the relevant municipal departments);
·   a non-profit community management scheme, assuming responsibility for occupant related funding on behalf of owners for a reasonable fee.

8. Emergent Best Practices

8.1 Introduction

Over the course of this research project, a number of recurring issues surfaced. These issues are summarized into four themes based upon the interviews and surveys with owners, caretakers, tenants and community members. These themes are:

· Affordability and Support Provision;
· Tenant Relationships;
· Physical Improvements (especially safety, bathroom ratios), and;
· Financial Affordability for Owners.

Within each theme, recommendations/ practices are proposed, totaling ten. In part, each is an attempt to synthesize key findings raised during the course of investigation. But more so, each theme and subsequent recommendation is culmination of listening to the voices of those who contributed to this research endeavor.

Theme One: Affordability and Support Provision

The issue of affordability and increased social support for tenants was strongly voiced in this report. Many tenants are having difficulties affording current rents. In fact, many residents on government assistance have had to resort to supplementing their rent by using food money taken from their basic assistance payment.

Recommendation One:
Increase Shelter Allowance

Recommendation Two:
A governmental subsidy program for employed tenants

The $236 Social Assistance Shelter Allowance affords tenants no opportunity to improve their quality of life, or for landlords to provide anything but the bare minimum of accommodation. The end result of a meager housing allowance is the stockpiling of low-income people in less-than adequate shelter. For example, one of the owners we spoke to indicated that $280 had allowed the owner to provide "...nice two-room suites..." but the reduction to $236 resulted in these suites being divided into single rooms. Of the tenants surveyed in this report, the average rent was $264 or $28 above what is paid by assistance. This gap must be closed.

The SASA should be set at a level allowing owners to provide reasonably spacious and clean rooms, safe, functional shared spaces, regular maintenance (including a caretaker) and reasonable profits for owners. Rates have not been adjusted since 1993, and this must be a priority to improve the quality of life of rooming house residents.

Related to Recommendation One, adjustments to shelter allowances must be considered within the larger context of "*working poor*" tenants. An increase in shelter allowances will drive up rents, reducing the affordability of rooms for the working poor. Subsidies for employed tenants maintain rooming houses as an affordable housing option. Neglecting the needs of employed tenants will contribute to the "revolving door" reality of rooming houses. As noted, one owner also beat the revolving door by offering lower rents to employed tenants.

Recommendation Three:
Social service and outreach supports for tenants with special needs

This report has acknowledged there will always be "hard-to-house" tenants — people with substance abuse problems, mental health issues or chronic poor health. Owners repeatedly said they are not social workers but are increasingly being depended on to essentially be "front line" workers. The provincial government must provide more support for people where they live — visits by case workers, job training, collection of social assistance while working at small jobs (which could include sweat equity work in their rooming house).

Owners must have greater access to resources to help those most in need. It was further suggested that visiting case workers could provide some general inspection services in rooming houses to ensure they meet basic occupancy standards for cleanliness, safety and security.

Theme Two: Relationships

The second major area relates to *relationships* within rooming houses: between tenants and tenant/caretakers; between tenants and owners; and between tenants, owners and the nearby community.

Recommendation Four:
Ensure rooming houses have adequate "in-house" support in the form of live-in caretakers

It was strongly suggested the live-in caretaker plays a pivotal role in the running of a successful rooming house. Caretakers often act as an important and essential bridge between tenants and owners, particularly in their role of keeping an eye on the state of relationships in a house, what one owner called "...preventative maintenance..." — making sure things are dealt with "...the minute voices start to rise".

Recommendation Five:
Supports, financing, information and guidance should be provided to encourage the formation and running of associations for rooming house tenants and rooming house owners

One of the most important *relationship building tools* may be a Tenants' Association. This idea had the highest positive response of any question asked in our surveys, and indicates most tenants' current sense of powerlessness and isolation. However, finding ways to help tenants connect and organize will be difficult. There needs to be strong support for a Rooming House Tenants' Association on the part of government, financial, third sector and academic organizations, both in terms of funding and facilitating the administration of such groups.

There should also be support for building tenants' associations from the ground up in each house. Getting "good" tenants was near the top of everyone's list of what makes a good rooming house, but maintaining good tenants also requires effort. One of the houses we visited that was most successful in terms of tenant cooperation had monthly tenant meetings. Tenants there had some voice about new tenants, and they set house rules together. A tenants' association in each house, working with a cooperative owner, would be a strong way to work towards better tenant relationships, more stable houses and a successful Tenants' Association. The cooperation of the owner is essential for this to take root.

Given the difficulties faced by many owners, supports should also be made available for an equivalent association for owners.

Recommendation Six:
Encourage communication between owners and the community

The community survey revealed that, in neighbourhoods where owners have made an effort to cooperate with the neighbourhood to make their properties part of the community, rooming houses were perceived in a relatively positive light.

Theme Three: Physical Improvements

The third thematic consideration is the importance of improving and maintaining the physical attributes of rooming houses.

Recommendation Seven:
Government should review occupancy standards to ensure a reasonable minimum space allowance is enforced

The physical improvement most consistently sought by survey participants (and tied inexorably to finances) is good sized rooms (often double rooms) with soundproofing. This consideration is particularly important in terms of tenants' ability to have adequate private places. This would inevitably lead to larger – and therefore fewer – suites per house, and hence fewer rent-paying tenants.

Recommendation Eight:
Owners ensure a reasonable tenant-to-bathroom ratio be set at 4:1

Related to the issue of private space were the problems surrounding the poor maintenance of too few bathrooms. Many participants said bathrooms were too crowded, filthy and not adequately maintained. From these discussions, it was thought there should be a maximum tenant to bathroom ratio of no greater than 4:1.

Recommendation Nine:
Improve safety/crime prevention measures

Safety is a critical priority for rooming house tenants. Many physical improvements can be made, including strong front doors with solid padlocks, peepholes, doorbell systems, proper lighting and strong doors on individual rooms.

Residents must be equal participants in building and maintaining better places. Both tenants and owners alike indicated a greater level of tenant responsibility would contribute to greater safety and cleanliness.

Theme Four: Financial Affordability for Owners

The final thematic consideration is the acknowledgement that while successful rooming houses provide tenants with clean, affordable and safe environments, they should also be financially viable and rewarding for owners. Therefore, all reasonable attempts should be made to ensure there is some level of profitability in the operation of a rooming house. **Recommendations One and Two** will contribute towards this end.

Recommendation Ten:
> *A targeted government-funded program to assist owners in improving their properties*

The current Social Assistance Shelter Allowance levels are affecting the ability of owners to properly maintain their properties. As a result, many rooming houses continue to physically decline. Without some sort of creative program to assist owners in maintaining and improving their properties, they will not be able to command higher rents or attract long-term tenants. Grants should be made available for the purpose of physical improvements.

8.2   Final Summary

This study attempted to listen to the community's voices about rooming houses -- tenants, owners and neighbours.

This is what they told us.

Rooming houses have always been a vital part of the housing market, and they always will be.

But over the last ten years in Winnipeg, rooming houses have become a systematic way to house many of our poorest people. It was ten years ago that government concentrated attention on fighting the deficit. Affordable housing has paid the price. As the city struggled to save money, the social assistance shelter allowance for rooming houses was cut from $250 to $236; social welfare teams were cut that used to help find adequate accommodation for tenants with social problems; and the customary damage deposit was eliminated.

This general tightening of the welfare system and the complete abandonment of public housing projects by senior levels of government has offloaded the provision of housing for the city's poorest tenants onto private rooming houses. Thus rooming houses join the city's ever-expanding industry of poverty, the expectation that some of our biggest social costs will be borne by food banks, soup lines and now, rooming houses.

There is no chance of improving rooming houses until government takes steps to improve benefits for those on social assistance and the working poor.

Although many tenants had good things to say about their accommodation, often it was because they have simply stopped expecting anything better. Most live in a cramped room, sharing a bathroom, a kitchen and far too much of their own personal life with six or more fellow-tenants. Noise and disturbances are common in even the best houses. In the worst, neighbours bring in drunken friends for parties that disturb everyone's life and can result in heavy damages and vomit-soaked carpets that may or may not be cleaned for the next tenant.

Sharing, for many tenants, is the worst thing -- sharing cigarettes, sharing the bathroom, sharing noise, disturbances, anger and fear. When tenants get enough money to choose, most show by moving out that they prefer to live in their own completely self-contained space. The issue of relationships would be much easier if tenants had rooms large enough so that no one had to share, combined with decent shared facilities so they can share something decent when they must. Rooming house tenants could become empowered to contribute to positive rooming houses by the formation of tenant associations.

Rooming house owners are universally pessimistic, both about the way they are perceived and their prospects for running good houses. They are not being given adequate funds to operate good quality accommodation. If they make a profit, they are stereotyped as slum landlords. Yet owners of rooming houses must be respected a business persons who should not be ashamed of making a profit, a profit that does not come at the expense of cutting other costs. To be sure, there are unscrupulous owners with all kinds of devious practices. But the majority of owners who are trying to provide decent accommodation are finding it harder and harder to do so. They have three alternatives: increase the number of tenants by making their spaces even more cramped and more unattractive; stop providing essential maintenance and basic services like toilet paper and light bulbs; or sell out while they

can, almost invariably to an owner who will suck all they can out of the house and then walk away from it.

The community of neighbours and businesses around rooming houses shared many stereotypes of rooming houses -- messy, drunken, noisy—but these stereotypes lessened when there was good communication between owners, tenants and local community groups. A starting point for communication can be the simple things: cleaning the yard, removing the garbage, fixing the fence and the gutters.

One thing that all 300 tenants, owners and community members interviewed for this study agree on—no one is listening to their voices.

It has been a priority of government in recent years to pour massive amounts of money to fix up housing in the inner city in the name of homelessness. But virtually none of this money is reaching the poorest of the poor in rooming houses.

In the end, rooming houses have always provided a viable housing alternative, and will always continue to do so. But there must be a recognition that unless all concerned can commit money to improve rooming houses, they will continue a downward spiral.

And who should be concerned?

We should all be concerned–if only because of the huge human cost of the present system. This system represents a huge public investment as well–$10 million dollars a year paid through shelter allowances to rooming houses. Wee need to pay more and we need to make sure that what is being paid is giving a decent standard of living to the poorest of the poor in this city. This transformation of rooming houses requires the efforts of government, financial institutions, community groups, owners and tenants.

This report has offered10 recommendations as to how that effort can be directed—recommendations that have come from the people most concerned -- inner city residents, rooming house tenants and owners.

Is anyone listening?

9. Literature Review

9.1 A History of Rooming Houses in Canada

While rooming houses may be thought of as a neglected form of housing, they are not entirely absent from the housing literature. A number of governmental and independent reports have, over the past several decades, attempted to identify and resolve the many underlying problems associated with this form of housing. What an historical examination reveals is that many of these issues have been documented again and again; some have featured prominently in the present study. What is also important about this examination is that previous research and initiatives have produced excellent ideas that should be considered for the Winnipeg context.

9.1.1 Rooming Houses in a Growing Country

Of course, rooming houses were not always associated with problems and negative stereotypes. Indeed, as Nelson (2001) points out, rooming houses were once, in the early 20th century, a very popular form of housing in rapidly growing cities such as Winnipeg. As waves of immigrants crossed the country, their first priority was to secure affordable housing, which most often took the form of rooming or boarding houses (Nelson 2001, 3). After World War II, rooming houses continued to play an important and respected role in the housing market, many of them being run by war widows. In the 1950s-1970s, rooming houses were mainly occupied by working-class tenants, yet at the same time suburban growth pulled many middle-class households out of the inner city (*ibid.*, 5-6), and the housing boom of 1950s led to less demand for rooming houses (Higgitt, 2001). Owing partly to the recession in the 1980s, and the general transformation from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, many blue-collar workers were left out of the workforce. Rooming houses thus came to be used more by the working poor or those on social assistance.

9.1.2 Early Independent Research

One of the first major attempts to tackle the rooming house situation—and to challenge the many stereotypes associated with it—was undertaken by Torontonian Norman Browne in the late 1960s and early 1970's. His research found a number of systemic conditions concentrated poverty in rooming houses. Roomers, he noted, are the "...lost race of society..."as they are forced to, "...live in rooms that weren't designed for individual living… in homes that weren't designed for multiple occupancy..." (Browne 1969, 1). One of the reasons for the perpetuation of rooming houses as a residence for welfare recipients is that, because the rent component of social assistance payments are often delivered directly to landlords, some rooming house landlords accept *only* welfare recipients. As well, provincial social assistance regulations "...discourage living common-law… and this policy keeps [tenants] living in inferior conditions..." (Browne 1973, 4).

Despite the poor situations in which many roomers find themselves, McMaster and Browne (1973) discovered most roomers are not transient - they tend to live in a particular room for 8 to 10 years and then move on to another room (p. 3). However, as a result of generally deplorable living conditions, residents of rooming houses felt powerless to make any improvements in their lives: "Many are so dispirited, trapped within a sense of hopelessness, and lacking any consciousness of themselves as individuals, that they cannot conceptualize human rights, let alone fight for them" (p. 42).

9.1.3 Official Studies and the Need for Legislation

It was the need to more clearly establish what the rights of rooming house tenants were that led, in the mid 1980s, to the formation of Ontario's provincial Task Force on Roomers, Boarders and Lodgers. The foundation of their 1986 Report on *Protecting Occupants and Owners of Rooming, Boarding and Lodging Accommodation* (Ontario Task Force 1986a) was the recognition that tenants of rooming houses have specific characteristics playing important roles in determining their access to accommodation and the level of services they require, including the following:

· they are *consumers* of services, including accommodations, linens etc., and possible other medical or psychological care as well;

· the level of care received qualifies some of these tenants as medical *patients*;

· they are *occupants* of pieces of real estate with varying degrees of containment;

· they are *members* of a household group of unrelated people all of whom have responsibilities to one another;

· some tenants receive *public benefits*, for which they are required to meet certain criteria; and

· some of them may be *involved in the justice system*, i.e., on parole or probation, and therefore have obligations they must meet in return for their freedom (adapted from Task Force on Roomers Boarders and Lodgers 1986a, 1, emphasis in the original).

Because of these factors, the Task Force said there is a tendency for some tenants to be judged (and thus excluded from access to better housing) based on "...anticipated rather than actual behaviour...", and that rooming house landlords had greater autonomy to remove undesirable tenants, as "...normal protections against discrimination do not apply..." (*ibid.*, 2). The largest problem at the time was that rooming house residents were not deemed by the courts to fall under the *Landlord and Tenant Act* as "tenants" (*ibid.*, 21).

For their part, landlords reported their abilities to run successful accommodations were hampered by cumbersome and slow legal recourse; unhelpful police response to what are perceived as "domestic disturbances"; a lack of support or advice in dealing with mentally ill tenants; the unspoken assumption that landlords were not businesspeople but a social welfare service; and that the full application of rules and regulations made the whole enterprise unprofitable. Indeed, it was determined so many landlords sold their rooming houses that between 1971 and 1981, the province lost approximately 26 rooming houses every day (*ibid.*, 2-3). While owners have power over individual occupants, public regulations are "tipped against" owners (at least in Ontario). The Ontario Task Force (December 1986a) says "...it is only the non-enforcement of certain regulations or the capacity to tie enforcement up in legal knots which may permit some of them [the rooming houses] to stay in the business." (p. 17).

The Ontario Task Force's *Background Paper* (December 1986b) found this form of housing had advantages for the low-income renter. Most roomers, for instance, do not have the means to pay first and last month's rent — as is required in most apartment buildings in Ontario — and many rooming house landlords do not require it. Other roomers like not having to sign a lease, while others like being able to pay weekly or bi-weekly so they may leave if they want to (as they would be able to do if they were staying in a hostel/hotel) (p. 3). This "freedom" is countered by some very real threats requiring legal protection. Legal aid clinics documented arbitrary increases in rent, evictions without notice and changing of locks without notice. Sometimes tenants' possessions are seized for non-payment or left in the street. Also, many tenants do not get value for their money, since rents charged per room vary and often rooms are "unfit for habitation" (p. 3). The Task Force found "...many roomers will, if illegally evicted, never be able to wait out the court process..." and that "...no provisions exist to 'pick up the pieces' after a major conflict between a landlord and roomer, or among roomer." (p. 13).

The 1986 Ontario Task Force recommended evictions must only be granted in extreme cases, such as if the tenant is continuously destructive or if he/she has not paid rent for months. Calling the police to deal with these tenants is often not a solution since, "...police may be loathe to intervene in something they consider akin to a domestic quarrel." Also, police called on a suspicion of trouble do not have the right to enter private premises. When police do come, it is often after the trouble has peaked (often the case with noise complaints) and there is often no evidence that can be used to lay charges (Ontario Task Force1986a p. 23–24).

To address some of these issues, the Task Force proposed a number of changes, such as:

·   legislation to protect roomers and boarders, either in the existing act or a new one (Ontario Task Force1986a, p. 19);

·   permitting a tenant or tenants to obtain an eviction order for dangerous tenants when landlords are unwilling to do so (p. 24);

·   a rental non-payment insurance program with premiums and deductibles for landlords (p. 30);

·   a fee-for-service contractual arrangement between the government and landlords (p. 30);

·   a rental guarantee from the Ministry of Housing, with good management incentives (p. 30);

·   a cooperative skip-tracing arrangement between all owners and supported by public authorities (p. 30);

·   a non-profit community management scheme which would assume responsibility for occupant related funding for a reasonable fee (p. 30) ;

·   an incentive program for accepting very low-income or "hard to house" occupants (p. 22); and

·   also: that rent increases should only occur in relation to increasing costs, that a registry system be created for roomers and boarders, and that the rooming house industry not be treated by government as simply another type of business (Ontario Task Force 1986b, p. 15)

Ultimately, the Task Force says "...the case for protection of roomers and boarders does not rest on statistics: it is a moral case, and a case bound on equality of treatment with others in society" (Ontario Task Force 1986b, p. 19).

9.1.4   Tragedy and Reassessment

The need to address and resolve these and other issues became tragically apparent in December of 1989, when ten rooming house tenants perished in a fire at Toronto's Rupert Hotel–the greatest loss of life due to fire in that city's history. This disaster led to an inquest, as well as a citizen-based Rupert Hotel Coalition (later changed to simply the Rupert Coalition) and, in 1991, to the City of Toronto Rooming House Review.

The review surveyed landlords, examined existing legislation, and proposed a number of models directed at making rooming houses more financially viable for both tenants and landlords. The review found landlords felt over-regulated and frustrated with numerous financial difficulties, leading to many cases of

"illegal" rooming houses; that there is a great need for additional support services for tenants to improve not just tenants' lives, but those of landlords, nearby neighbours and the community as a whole; and that there was a greater need for the city to play a larger role in terms of facilitating communication and in providing information to tenants, landlords, and communities (Toronto Rooming House Review 1992, i-ii). To meet these needs, the review proposed the following:

· that financial supports be provided for upgrading and refurbishing houses, rather than constructing new, subsidized public housing (pp. 21-24);

· that shelter allowances be made available for both welfare recipients and the working poor to supplement their abilities to pay rent (pp. 24-30);

· that the city should produce a Rooming House *Handbook* to educate and advise landlords and tenants about their rights and responsibilities, as well about the resources and services available to them (p. 31); ·

· that the city provide and staff a Rooming House Information Centre (p. 31); and

· that the city create and facilitate a Rooming House Working Group (composed of landlords, tenants, members of the public and representatives from the relevant municipal departments) that would monitor the work of the information centre (p. 32).

These final points–regarding the need to provide education—are reiterated in the works of others. Campsie (1994) says many private landlords are sometimes inexperienced and require legal and/or technical training in order to work with hard-to-house tenants and state/city officials (fire, police, etc.) (p. 21). In general, however, these studies show a powerful recurring theme: that of the ongoing struggle in balancing owner's rights and those of tenants'. Many landlords are discouraged from converting housing to multiple units because the "emphasis on tenants' rights has not been matched by an equal emphasis on tenants' responsibility for such things as fire safety in rooming houses" (*Ibid,* 20). As a consequence, the number of landlords in Canada has decreased steadily since the 1970s.

9.1.5   Addressing Winnipeg's Rooming House Situation

As a part of their deliberations, the 1986 Ontario Task Force published a report on Winnipeg's rooming houses that recognized the situation here was important and noteworthy (Newman 1986). It found some of the demand for rooming houses could be traced to the high rate of demolitions in the late 1970s, when approximately 500 multiple-occupancy structures were demolished each year; this was done at a time when, according to the 1981 census, there were an estimated 11,000 non-senior, non-family households facing a "demand problem" (meaning more than 30% of their income went towards shelter).

In 1993, seven years after the release of the Ontario Task Force's report on Winnipeg, the City of Winnipeg's social services department cut the rental allowance from $285.00 to $236.00. The cutbacks didn't apply to landlords with suites. Appeals from opponents seemed effective at first, but in 1994 the province legislated the rollbacks (Nelson 2001, 24-25). Since this rollback, it has become increasingly difficult for many owners to make rooming houses financially viable. This amount of money is considered

adequate only in that it corresponds to the lowest available prices in the rooming house market.

In 1998 the CBC produced a radio documentary on Winnipeg's rooming house crisis called *Rooms For Rent* (CBC 1998). Their investigation demonstrated a number of facts many had long suspected:

- that most rooming house owners lived far from their properties;
- that current building codes (requiring smoke alarms, fire alarms, adequate escape routes and tight fitting doors to prevent fires from spreading) are cost-prohibitive;
- and that rooming houses attract frequent attention from the police owing to routine domestic disturbances, assaults and rowdy parties.

According to the program, one of the problems underlying the situation are societal biases regarding housing: Ross Mitchell, a City of Winnipeg Planner interviewed by CBC says,"...[t]he government feels the need to accommodate certain segments of society like the handicapped and seniors. (There) seems to be a large demographic, primarily males, either unemployed or unemployable, a segment of society that government doesn't feel the same responsibility for in relating to housing." (CBC 1998).

The Starr Group and Richard Drdla report for CMHC (2000) found Winnipeg rooming houses in a wide range of building types: in former single-family homes, in purpose-built rooming houses (from the 1940s and 1950s) and converted duplexes and four-plexes. Although the primary clientele for the past two decades has consisted mainly of older males, migrants and the mentally troubled, in recent years this profile has changed to include increasing numbers of younger

people, single mothers and aboriginal people.

As the need for low income housing has become more acute, and rooming houses themselves have become more prevalent, governments have attempted to respond to the situation on a number of fronts. One of these approaches has been regulatory.

9.1.6   The Search for Fair Regulations

In 1996, the City of Ottawa published a series of recommendations to "soften" the impact of rooming houses on the surrounding urban environment (City of Ottawa, 1996), including:

- establishing separation distance between rooming houses to avoid problems associated with concentration of rooming houses. The argument against this was that it could reduce the availability of accommodation (p. 8);

- limiting the geographic areas where rooming houses can be permitted. Again, there were arguments that this would be a "classist" policy resulting in a concentration, and leading to decay. Also, such a policy runs contrary to many civic plans for urban intensification in all residential neighbourhoods (p. 8);

- limiting the occupancy or number of rooms per rooming house. Those opposing this regulations said it would limit the efficient use of land and existing housing stock; that it would have adverse results (i.e. – evictions) for the tenants; and that limits of this nature would be arbitrary (p. 9).

- limiting rooming house use to certain types of buildings. Opponents pointed

out this may be discriminatory under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms since it would ignore the plight of those who cannot afford certain types of accommodation (p. 9); and

· setting lot areas, frontage, height and yard standards. This can put a stop to conversions which result in rooming houses that are too small, and it has the added benefit of helping to preserve neighbourhood character (p. 9).

The report concluded with a recommendation that the City of Ottawa set up a Landlord-Tenant Rooming House Registry. "Such a registry is viewed as a necessity for pursuing initiatives to improve the social and physical conditions of rooming houses." (City of Ottawa, 1996, p. 12).

Regulatory approaches such as these add to the complexity and cost of running a rooming house. Many definitions can exist for one city under different by-laws; as well, as by-laws are added, older by-laws are usually not re-examined. (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000). Regulations regarding rooming houses are also criticized for their unintended consequences. For instance, Seaborn (1993) says policies confining rooming houses to older structures only exacerbates the problem, since "...older buildings are the least able to withstand the physical abuse of conversion into and operation as rooming houses…" and "...they can seldom provide the levels of acoustic privacy, fire safety, security and parking requirements of new structures." (p. 1). If flexibility is used when applying regulations some of the identified problems can be reduced. Relaxed zoning rules, for example, can have a positive impact, as a "mix of dwelling types [within a rooming house] tempers the social problems of homogeneous

rooming houses" (*ibid*).

9.2   Regulatory Regimes Across Canada and in Winnipeg

The CMHC publication *Regulatory Factors in the Retention and Expansion of Rooming House Stock* examined rooming house regulatory practices in eleven cities (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000). The cities examined in the study have older housing stock and mixed uses in their central areas. As a consequence, they have historically permitted rooming houses and other multiple occupancies in these areas.

For the most part, all these cities use the same types of regulations, zoning, maintenance and occupancy standards, building standards, fire-safety standards, public health standards and licensing bylaws. The following section provides a brief overview of each of these regulatory issues. Where possible, the relevant Winnipeg bylaw is cited.

9.2.1   Zoning Regulations

Municipal zoning bylaws are used to designate where rooming houses are permitted. Typically, rooming houses are allowed in zones where apartments are also permitted. Rooming houses are not usually allowed in single-family zones, especially in those areas built in the last 40 years. Many cities do not allow them in the intermediate zones, like those designated for semi-detached units, duplexes and tri-plexes. Additional requirements such as owner-occupancy; excessive on-site parking; specific yard depth and widths; and maximum height and minimum size for lots or frontages also limit the potential for rooming house development in some municipalities(The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000).

The City of Winnipeg is divided for zoning

purposes into two regions: The City of Winnipeg Zoning Bylaw (6400/94) and Downtown Winnipeg Zoning Bylaw (4800/88). In The City of Winnipeg Zoning Bylaw a "...boarding house, lodging house, or rooming house..." is defined as a building where lodging is provided for compensation, with or without meals; and where lodgers do not have their own cooking facilities. This excludes hotels and motels and other premises where care, treatment or supervision is provided, but includes triplexes.

Rooming houses with up to 12 persons are permitted only in all multiple-family zoning districts located primarily in the downtown and inner city areas, but also in some older residential neighbourhoods outside of these districts. The City of Winnipeg allows up to two boarders or roomers to live in a dwelling unit in all-residential districts. One parking space is required per two rooming units. Rooming houses with more than 12 people are permitted in these zones, but on a conditional basis. In these cases, new applications are subject to a public hearing process. To locate a rooming house in a single- or two-family zoning district, a property re-zoning is required, or alternatively, a zoning variance (The Rooming House Inspection & Licensing Program 2000).

9.2.2   Maintenance and Occupancy Standards

Maintenance and occupancy bylaws set standards for the maintenance of existing properties. Generally, they are directed at preventing the deterioration of older housing stock. Maintenance regulations are the most extensive, but at the same time the least specific. These bylaws generally cover structural soundness, weather tightness and general state of repair of the building; adequacy of the water supply; plumbing,

kitchen and bathroom facilities; heating systems, electrical service, lighting and ventilation; and occupancy standards. Occasionally, these regulations result in potential overlaps and conflicts with provincial building and fire codes and public health legislation (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000).

Bylaw No. 4903/88 of The City of Winnipeg establishes a minimum standard of maintenance and occupancy for residential property, including rooming houses. According to Section 5.1 of the bylaw, general minimum space standards for dwellings include the following requirements:

- all habitable rooms, bathrooms and toilet rooms shall have a ceiling height of not less than 2100 mm;
- all hallways, corridors and passageways must have ceiling height of not less than 2100 mm anda width of not less than 850 mm;
- each dwelling unit shall have at least 7.4 m² of habitable floor area for each occupant thereof and the floor area shall be calculate on the bases of the total area of the habitable rooms;
- each room used for sleeping purposes in a dwelling: shall have a floor area of at least 5.6 m² for a single occupant; and shall have at least 3.7 m² of floor area for each occupant when two or more persons occupy the room; and
- each bedroom or other room used for sleeping purposes shall have at least one closet or wardrobe for storage of clothing.

Rooming houses with basement, attic or partial storey dwelling units should correspond with the space requirements for

Table: 9.1 Summary of Regulatory Regimes in the Profiled Cities									
Cities	**Regulations**						**Licensing**	**Inspections**	
	Zoning	**Maintenance**	**Fire Safety**			**Public Health**			
			P	**L**	**O**	**P**	**L**		**R**	**C**
St. John's NF	X	X			X			X	X	
Halifax NS	X	X	X							X
Dartmouth NS	X	X	X					X	X	
Quebec City QC	X	X	X					X	X	
Montreal QC	X	S	S			S		X		X
Ottawa ON	X	X	X			X		X	X	
Toronto ON	X	X	X			X		X	X	
Etobicoke ON	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	
Hamilton ON	X	X	X			X		X	X	
Kitchener ON	X	X	X					X	X	
Winnipeg MB	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	
Edmonton AB	X	S	S			S		X	X	
Vancouver BC	X	X	X	X				X		**X**

* = consolidated regulations (several areas consolidated into single regulatory mechanism)
R = regular inspections
C = inspections on basis of complaint
P = provincial legislation
L = local bylaw
O = other sources

(Source: The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000)

basement, attic and partial storey occupancies of this bylaw.

The bylaw also presents the standards for exterior and interior walls, ceilings, roofs, doors and windows, porches, sheds, stairs, guards, balustrades, handrails, floors and the structural, plumbing, heating, mechanical and electrical standards for dwellings.

9.2.3 Building Codes

Building codes are established by the provincial government and are typically based on the National Building Code. Municipalities are able to supplement these regulations. The codes address construction-related standards that must be met in new buildings, major renovations or alterations of use. As the standards are not retroactive, they do not affect existing rooming houses legally

converted in the past. (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000). The Winnipeg Building Bylaw 4555/87 was adopted in 1987. This bylaw applies to new and existing buildings, including the design, construction, erection, placement, alteration, repair, renovation, demolition, relocation, removal, occupancy or change in occupancy of any building or structure or addition to a building or structure in the city. The bylaw adopts the building construction codes and building construction standards established or prescribed under Section 3 of the Buildings & Mobile Homes Act (The Winnipeg Building Bylaw No. 4555/87, Section 2).

9.2.4 Fire-Safety Standards

The key regulations for rooming houses are fire-safety standards, because they deal with potentially life-threatening hazards and high renovation expenditures. Older properties, converted to multiple-occupancy buildings as in the case of rooming houses, usually do not meet contemporary fire-safety standards. Therefore, these properties ultimately face expensive upgrades (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000).

The Starr Group study found most jurisdictions apply only some of the standards to older converted multi-occupancy buildings. For example, they require compliance with regulations focusing mainly on early warning systems and emergency egress, whereas fire containment and fire suppression are omitted because of their relatively high cost. These standards are described as providing a minimum acceptable alternative, or representing a practical compromise based on what is desirable and what can be achieved within a reasonable cost (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000).

The Winnipeg Fire Prevention Bylaw (1322/76) establishes the standards for fire

prevention, fire fighting and life safety in buildings, and for the prevention, containment and the fighting of fires originating outside buildings. The main condition concerning rooming houses and other rental properties is the requirement for more advanced and tamper-proof smoke alarms than specified in the Manitoba Fire Code (ibid.).

The Residential Building Fire Safety Bylaw requires rooming houses and other older multiple-occupancy rental structures in the City of Winnipeg to be free of fire hazards, regulates the storage of flammable substances and incorporates the provisions of the Manitoba Fire Code. It requires buildings to have working fire safety devices installed to warn of fire and the provision to escape during an emergency. The four most basic requirements for rooming houses are:

- smoke alarms that detect smoke and emit an audible alarm to warn the occupants of a fire emergency;
- fire alarm systems that provide a reliable means of detecting a fire at an early stage in its development and give an early warning within the building so as to enable a safe evacuation;
- two separate and independent ways out of a building are required so if one becomes unusable in a fire situation, an alternate way out is possible; and
- tight-fitting doors to prevent fires from spreading (The Rooming House Inspection & Licensing Program 2000).

The relevant provisions apply to a building containing a residential occupancy, having a maximum building height of three storeys, and was originally designed for use by one or two families but has been converted so as to provide more than two suites (i.e., a rooming house) or more than one suite with a

commercial occupancy (Bylaw 4304/86, "Definitions").

9.2.5 Public Health Regulations

The public health bylaws set minimum standards for the area of dwelling units, lighting, ventilation, plumbing and fixtures, and electrical and heating systems. They focus on issues associated with sanitation, cleanliness and the condition of bathroom and kitchen facilities and may be a part of a city's maintenance, health or licensing bylaw (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000, 22).

In Winnipeg, the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority is in charge of the suburban areas, and the Environmental Health Branch of the Community Services Department is responsible for the inner city, including rooming houses. The two departments are responsible for enforcing the provisions of the Manitoba Public Health Act in all multiple rental properties, including rooming houses (ibid).

9.2.6 Licensing and Consolidated Regulations

Licensing is a key component for effective regulation and enforcement for rooming houses. Most inspectors rely on provisions in municipal licensing bylaws for the right of entry to carry out inspections in an timely and regular manner. The Starr Group research concluded that all examined cities with effective control of their rooming house stock use regular inspections (The Starr Group Inc. and Richard Drdla Associates 2000).

In 1995, the City of Winnipeg introduced amendments to the License Bylaw (Bylaw No. 6551/91, section 35) requiring "rooming

houses" be licensed. As a result of this initiative, a Rooming House Branch was created as a regulatory body mandated to address regulation, enforcement and licensing requirements. Annual rooming housing licenses cost $292 for the calendar year. The mandate of the Rooming House Section Enforcement Officers is to ensure all buildings defined as a rooming house under the license bylaw meet all licensing requirements.

In the past, three different departments were involved in the process, each conducting an individual and specialized component. This was often confusing for the property owner, requiring separate appointments for multiple inspections. The key aspect of the city's Rooming House Program is that it amalgamates all the functions so one inspector carries out all inspections on an individual property. (The Rooming House Inspection & Licensing Program 2000).

The Rooming House Branch was staffed with inspectors from the fire department, the existing Buildings Branch, the Health Department and the Zoning Branch. An intensive training program was developed, giving inspectors the opportunity to become skilled in all facets of applicable requirements. Staff in other areas address special problems (ibid). Each officer was appointed as a Special Constable and has the authority to inspect, regulate, enforce and issue the Provincial Common Offence Notice. Prerequisites for a license include ensuring permissible land use under zoning regulations, compliance with the Fire Safety Bylaw as well as the life safety provisions of the Residential Building Fire Safety Bylaw 4304/86.

The primary purpose of this Branch was to deal with the backlog of uninspected but suspected rooming houses, in order to comply with the city's new license by-law. This

process was to be completed in October - November 2002; after which the responsibility for inspections would be taken over by the Winnipeg Fire Department.

9.2.7 Discussion

Zoning regulations restricting rooming houses to areas where multi-family housing is permitted has the effect of spatially segregating rooming house residents into more central parts of the city; this results in concentrations of rooming houses–and poverty. Such regulations are premised on the supposed "undesirability" of this form of low-income housing.

Licensing rooming houses has benefits and drawbacks. Its chief benefit is that it makes rooming houses officially "visible". Inspection of licensed rooming houses ensures they comply with building codes, fire codes and city bylaws. This allows cities to set standards and to apply sanctions against landlords who do not keep their properties safe or in good repair. However, some of these standards are difficult to achieve for owners of small rooming houses and they can lose their license. Houses either close down (evicting tenants in the process) or operate illegally.

Many jurisdictions recognize the practical limitations on enforcement of certain laws where older housing stock is concerned, and choose instead to adopt more flexible approaches. These can include strengthening requirements for superior smoke detectors and alarms, rather than requiring owners to spend a great deal of money on upgrading buildings themselves.

9.3 Conclusion

As these and other studies and reports have come and gone and the basic conditions in rooming houses failed to improve, some of

those involved in housing issues began to voice the opinion that this form of housing was irredeemable and that attempts to improve rooming houses legitimized them as an acceptable form of housing, rather than promoting the need for new and better forms of housing for the poor. Accordingly, there has arisen a belief that rooming houses will soon be an obsolete form of housing. Others feel rooming houses are a necessary stepping stone towards better housing that should be targeted for improvements in their own right (Campsie 1994).

It is the belief of the authors of this report that the rooming house model – that of independent residences for single people built around certain shared facilities – is entirely legitimate. Indeed, in an era of dramatic demographic shifts that is seeing radical reassessments over the nature of "families" and "households", the need for alternative models of housing not predicated on the nuclear family will only grow stronger. What has made rooming houses so prone to decrepitude, poverty and violence is not the form of housing itself, but rather the stigma attached to it, and the political economy of housing in the North American context. Perhaps, even more important than the rebuilding and renovation of rooming houses, is the need to restructure our own cultural values surrounding the provision of housing.

Summary

Rooming houses were once a commonly accepted and respectable form of housing.

It has long been recognized that rooming house tenants have unique needs and require certain legal considerations and protection.

Given the particular characteristics of rooming house tenants and the form of housing itself, innovative multi-sectoral policies, processes and institutions are required to ensure the rights of tenants and owners are addressed equitably.

The Winnipeg context has been nationally recognized as particularly acute.

A major factor in ensuring rooming houses are a safe and livable form of housing is the enforcement of appropriate regulations.

Care should be taken in creating and enforcing regulations, as they can have unintended or inequitable consequences.

Alternative or flexible means of addressing safety codes can be more financially viable for owners.

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