

Power to the highrise people: should blackout generate new laws?

The ice storm left many GTA tower dwellers trapped without light and water. With predictions of more extreme weather, should building codes be updated?

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Sometime very early on Dec. 22, Karl Mikson woke up startled by the dark. His night light was out. Nothing of the familiar glow from the street or surrounding buildings pierced the blackness around him.

Fortunately, the 87-year-old pensioner was prepared. He always has bottled water, candles, a flashlight and a battery-operated radio on hand.

But the [ice storm](#) had left him, like thousands of other highrise dwellers in his Broadview-Danforth neighbourhood, stuck on an upper floor — in his case, the eighth — with no elevator service, emergency lighting that would quickly die off and a trickle of water that would soon tap out in his rented apartment.

“It was very hard,” he says. “I went down the stairs, and no, I am not in good shape. My walking is not very good. But I had to go get new batteries.”



It took 60 hours until hydro was restored to Mikson’s 18-storey highrise, which is typical of the Toronto apartment towers built in the 1960s and 1970s. They are solid and stolid, clustered in St. Jamestown and in East York, flanking the Don Valley Parkway and Highway 427, standing guard over inner suburbs such as Scarborough and Etobicoke. Many of them were in the cold and dark after the ice storm.

According to the 2011 census, 545,840 Torontonians rent apartments in buildings of five storeys or higher. The Federation of Metro Tenants’ Associations reports that at least 1,000 rental buildings of 200 units or more are scattered across the city. That’s some 200,000 households, a good many of them on upper floors.

Steve Weinrieb, senior property manager for Park Property Management, is responsible for 8,000 apartments. He was on the run throughout December’s outage, tending to blacked-out buildings in Scarborough and the Annex. He was getting water and energy bars to vulnerable residents and putting up Glow Sticks in halls and stairwells while trying to protect pipes and boilers from freezing.

“The buildings built in the ’60s and ’70s, they don’t have generators,” he explains. “They have emergency lighting for two hours, emergency batteries for the fire alarm system and that’s basically it. At the end of two hours, there’s no lighting at all in the buildings.”

And that’s all Ontario’s fire and building code regulations dictate. To simplify what is a tangle of emergency requirements, what the codes say is

that, whether from a generator or batteries, all buildings of 18 metres or more above grade must power at least one elevator for firefighters, and provide minimal lighting and ventilation, enough for residents to evacuate. Although newer builds, both rental and condo, are required to have generators, there is nothing in the current laws about power sources for lighting, pumping water to upper floors or reserving one elevator for residents' use during a prolonged blackout.

"The generators are tied in more to life safety, so, should there be a problem in the building such as a fire, the fire alarm comes on and people get out. And there's no power after that," explains Jeff Coatt, vice-president of the condominium group for the engineering company CCI. "There's no consideration for power outages."

Deborah Wynne is not convinced her building met even the minimal standards.

She lives with her dachshund, Astro, on the 10th floor of a rental building near Mikson's. She had just returned from an evening out when the lights went out.

"I looked into the hallway to see if it was just me," she recalls. "The (emergency) light was just about dead. I looked again half an hour later and it was completely dark. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face." The 19-storey building, opened in 1972, had neither water nor elevator service. Wynne had to carry Astro up and down the stairs, juggling a flashlight. In her mid-40s, the government worker is in good shape. Other tenants were not so fortunate.

"There's a man here who is really sizable, really sizable," she recounts, adding gasping noises for effect. "Somebody said he was in the foyer, really breathing heavily. Really heavily."

Christine Holman and Barb Barron live close by, on the 12th floor of yet another building of similar design and vintage. As enthusiastic deep-bush campers, they thought they had the blackout covered.

"We filled up about 20 litres of water," says Holman, a retired lawyer in her mid-60s. "We hauled out our propane tanks and candle lanterns and everything, because we knew that we could be in for an extended period. Fortunately we already had bought all the Christmas liquor and wine."

"We had all the essentials," Barron chimes in with a laugh.

But then, it struck them: their Jack Russell, Wiz.

"That is when I realized, 'Oh crap, I have to walk him up and down the stairs,'" says Holman. "There's one gentleman who has a dog that's 16 years old. He had to carry her up and down I don't know how many flights,

because he lives above us. I saw him two or three times, sitting on the stairs, resting. That was heartbreaking.”

With extreme-weather events seeming to hit harder and more frequently, experts are looking at the Toronto’s ability to cope. There’s talk of burying hydro wires and making other infrastructure changes to mitigate flooding. But the costs are overwhelming.

“In some ways we are hiding our heads in the sand by not supporting what we need to prepare for and adapt to these changing conditions,” maintains Richard Kinchlea, chair of Centennial College’s Emergency Management and Public Safety Institute.

He doesn’t believe that governments will force owners and managers of older buildings to do retrofits with generators: “There would be tremendous opposition because of the costs. And there’s another thing, can retrofits even be done?”

Coatt knows of only two older GTA buildings now going to the trouble and expense of installing generators capable of sustained use.

“It’s very, very cost-prohibitive,” he cautions. “You’re looking at \$100,000, \$200,000, \$300,000. Most people don’t have that money.”

Kinchlea suggests that, until the city figures out how to pay for infrastructure adaptations, it’s best to directly help residents of highrises who may find them difficult to escape without elevators and yet, without heat and water, impossible to stay in.

“One of the difficulties we have right now,” he says, “is getting to all the vulnerable populations in our city — and that’s not just seniors. That’s the people who, 20 years ago, might have been recuperating in a hospital or in some sort of institution. Maybe we have to make sure that all vulnerable people are covered off.”

City councillor Mary Fragedakis, who visited all of the many highrises in her hard-hit Toronto-Danforth ward, says she was “very alarmed” at the plight of so many without heat or light.

“I believe the minimum requirements are not sufficient,” she wrote in an email that detailed the relevant sections of the building code. “So I am following up with staff about what changes could be made.”

As for property managers, they’re putting their heads together, via the Greater Toronto Apartment Association and other industry groups.

“We’re reviewing our building systems to improve tenant comfort,” says Randy Daiter, vice-president for residential properties for M & R Holdings and its 4,000 apartments “We’re in communication with other property management companies and consultants in the industry to determine what

practical changes can be made in the case of these catastrophic and longer term events.”

To Mikson, Wynne and Holman, if landlords were to invest in improved building emergency systems, they would trade a rent increase for peace of mind.

“If I had to pay \$50 a month more to get a lit hallway and a functional elevator, that would mean a lot,” says Wynne.

“I think it would be worth it,” agrees Holman. “But I also recognize that that could be a hardship for a whole lot of people. But I think there should be such a thing. And I think we should be prepared to pay for it.”