



Media Release

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WOWC Unveils 2024-25 Priorities

Southwestern Ontario – Members of the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC) met virtually today with their regional Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) to unveil the WOWC's priorities for 2024-25 as well as to present and discuss strategic approaches and mutual opportunities for collaboration and advocacy over the coming year.

The Caucus has identified the following key priorities for the coming year:

- Housing
- Infrastructure
- Workforce to Support Economic Growth
- Mental Health, Addictions and Homelessness

"The WOWC members have conducted extensive research and significant discussions over the past few months, and as a result have decided on a renewed and strengthened focus on these priorities for 2024 and early 2025," stated WOWC Chair Glen McNeil.

"These four issues have consistently been identified as the primary concerns for small and rural municipalities in Western Ontario," added Chair McNeil. "The Caucus is therefore staying the course, given its significant familiarity and advocacy efforts with these matters over the past few years."

Multiple provincial MPPs were present to receive an exclusive presentation of the WOWC's priorities, which were adopted unanimously by the Caucus earlier this month following a strategic session to examine the most important advocacy issues and the path to achieving results. WOWC members stressed the importance of having the support of the provincial government to further advocate for these priorities.

"The WOWC members agree wholeheartedly on the importance and urgency of collaborating together on these critical issues, and the necessity of speaking with one united voice with our MPPs on behalf of the 1.5 million residents we collectively represent," explained WOWC Vice-Chair Andy Lennox.

Specific areas of focus within the four priorities are as follows:

Housing

Housing affordability, particularly in rural areas, continues to remain a strong focus within rural Western Ontario. Given the current housing and rental market, it is crucial to focus on increasing the supply of affordable housing, of all forms, so that all residents regardless of income level have a safe place to call home. The WOWC requests:

- That the Province of Ontario reinstate housing services and the cost of land as eligible development charges (DC) costs;
- The complete details on the Province's commitment to municipalities, particularly measures to better assist small and rural communities; and
- Equity for small and rural municipalities regarding housing infrastructure funding, including the [Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program](#) and the [Building Faster Fund](#).

Infrastructure

As Western Ontario continues to be the economic driver of the Province, and more investments are being made in the region, the WOWC needs to ensure adequate infrastructure is in place to support the growth, along with the appropriate financial support.

- The WOWC requires clear communication from the Province of Ontario on the infrastructure build out in Western Ontario, including clarity from the government on what to expect for infrastructure investments, including hydroelectricity, natural gas, water, and wastewater.
- The WOWC appreciates and recognizes the significant investments and efforts being made to attract investments to Western Ontario, however, the impact of the required infrastructure upgrades borne by municipalities are not offset by the funding provided to the municipal sector.
- Much as Ontario is Canada's economic driver, Western Ontario is the Province's economic driver. With that, comes the need for additional housing, workforce, and infrastructure.

Workforce to Support Economic Growth

There has been an ongoing focus for the WOWC over the past few years on workforce retention and expansion. The WOWC requires several important considerations regarding workforce development in rural Western Ontario, both to support economic growth and to stabilize the regional economy:

- Funding for rural transportation and childcare, to help residents commute to work.
- Additional investments in training and upskilling for people living and housed in the region.
- Support for the growing and urgent need for health care and social assistance workers in the region, particularly in long-term care and early childhood education.

Mental Health, Addictions, and Homelessness

Mental health, addictions and homelessness funding for small and rural communities is a necessity. The WOWC continues to emphasize and request:

- That a specific portion of the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) funding be allocated specifically for small and rural communities; and
- Permanent funding for the Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT) programs, through annualized funding and permanently-funded mental health officer positions.

“The WOWC looks forward to continuing this important work through its significant research and ongoing collaboration with regional stakeholders,” concluded Vice-Chair Lennox. “With our collective regional power, and commitment from our provincial partners, we can advocate and collaborate on these key priorities and find much-needed solutions for our residents and communities.”

About

The ***Western Ontario Wardens’ Caucus (WOWC)*** is a not-for-profit organization representing 15 upper and single-tier municipalities in Southwestern Ontario, representing more than 1.5 million residents. The WOWC aims to enhance the prosperity and overall wellbeing of rural and small urban communities across the region. Caucus members work collectively to influence federal and provincial legislation and programs through advocacy, research, analysis and education. For more information, visit www.wowc.ca.

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