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The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC) is a not-for-profit organization representing the interests of the 15 upper- and single-tier municipalities in rural Western Ontario, including 300 communities within its geographic boundaries and 1.5 million people to whom the region is home. The organization aims to enhance the prosperity and overall well-being of rural and small urban communities across the region, by working collectively with upper levels of government.

The WOWC recently adopted its strategic advocacy approach for 2024-2025 and identified a series of key priorities for the

coming year. This information is intended to continue building on the collaboration with the member municipalities in rural Western Ontario.

All levels of government must work together and use their expertise and collective knowledge to work through these mutual priorities. The challenges facing municipalities, particularly small and rural communities, are on the rise – ranging from housing, workforce, and infrastructure to mental health, addictions, and homelessness.

The WOWC strives for partnership, collaboration, and dialogue with other levels of government – and embodies

these values in its advocacy efforts in the spirit of maintaining and supporting these critical relationships. Investing in municipal services will lay foundations for the continued recovery and future prosperity of our communities.

The WOWC has conducted significant research on its priority issues and is proposing concrete solutions to address the challenges in rural Western Ontario. Being part of the process and the conversation will be crucial as we move forward. Governments need to be all in this together – this partnership will ensure collective success for Western Ontario.



 **300**
COMMUNITIES SERVED
ACROSS 15 UPPER-TIER AND
SINGLE-TIER MUNICIPALITIES

 **250k**
**BUSINESSES
OPERATING**

 **1.5m**
PEOPLE REPRESENTED

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1 HOUSING



ISSUE

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 commends both upper levels of government and the significant investments in housing that have been made.

THE ASK

The WOWC requests that the Province of Ontario reinstate housing services and the cost of land as eligible development charges (DC) costs.



BACKGROUND

The WOWC appreciates that some clarity and commitment have been provided by the Province of Ontario on keeping municipalities “whole” regarding a loss of development charge revenue.

The WOWC appreciates the proposals in Bill 185, the Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act, 2024, including the elimination of the five-year phase-in of development charge rates (introduced under Bill 23) and development-related charge exemptions and discounts for affordable residential units. The WOWC recognizes this renewed approach to collaboration, however, there is still more required to assist the municipal sector.

As AMO has highlighted, there is a need to reinstate both housing services and the cost of land as eligible

DC costs. Together, these changes cost municipalities approximately \$4 billion over a 10-year period and will have a material impact on municipalities’ ability to invest in community housing.

Minister Calandra announced in December 2023 that consultations would soon take place to “inform potential legislative changes for the government’s upcoming Housing Supply Action Plan that would enhance municipalities’ ability to invest in housing-enabling infrastructure.”

When can the WOWC expect to receive the final details on the Province’s commitment to municipalities, particularly measures to better assist small and rural communities?

THE ASK

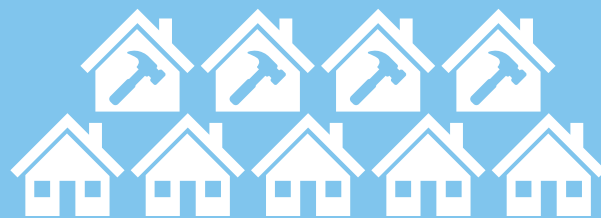
The WOWC requests equity for small and rural municipalities regarding housing infrastructure funding.

BACKGROUND

The WOWC requires information on how its small and rural upper-tier and single-tier municipalities can access the \$1-billion [Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program](#), which is intended to support core infrastructure projects that help enable housing for growing and developing communities, such as roads and water infrastructure.

The WOWC also requires a response on how its municipalities can access the 10 per cent (or \$120 million) of the [Building Faster Fund](#) that is being set aside for small, rural, and northern municipalities. This fund is intended to help build housing-enabling infrastructure and prioritize projects that speed up the increase of housing supply.

As of April 2024, three of 117 municipalities in rural Western Ontario have received this funding, for a total of \$3.34 million, or 2.7% of the total funding, when they represent 26% of the municipalities in the Province.



\$1 BILLION
MUNICIPAL HOUSING
INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2 INFRASTRUCTURE



ISSUE

As Western Ontario continues to be the economic driver of the Province, and more investments are being made in our region, we need to ensure that there is the infrastructure to support the growth.

THE ASK

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 utility investments, including hydroelectricity, natural gas, water, and wastewater.



BACKGROUND

The WOWC appreciates and recognizes the significant investments and efforts being made at the provincial and federal levels to attract investments to Western Ontario. Unfortunately, the impact of the required infrastructure upgrades that are borne by municipalities are not offset by the limited funding provided to the municipal sector.

As a result, local property taxpayers living and working in small and rural municipalities are paying a significant

portion of the bill for the investments being attracted and created. 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. The region needs assistance from regional champions to advance this message on its behalf.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3

WORKFORCE TO SUPPORT ECONOMIC GROWTH



ISSUE

There has been an ongoing focus for the WOWC over the past few years on workforce retention and expansion. This has been highlighted in the collaborative regional work through the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy.

THE ASK

The WOWC requires several important considerations regarding workforce development in rural Western Ontario, both to support economic growth and to stabilize the regional economy.



BACKGROUND

Rural Western Ontario requires provincial funding for rural transportation and childcare; these are both critical factors in helping get people to work. There is also a growing and urgent need for health care and social assistance workers in the region, particularly in long-term care.

Projected employment in the health care and social assistance sector in Western Ontario by 2030 is estimated

at 82,000 jobs. The health care sector – including long-term care and early childhood education – is expected to have 28,000 jobs that need to be filled between 2020 and 2030.

Furthermore, while immigration is helpful and appreciated, this issue cannot be solved through immigration alone. Additional investments in training and upskilling are required for people already living and housed here in the region.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4 MENTAL HEALTH, ADDICTIONS, & HOMELESSNESS



ISSUE

Funding for our rural communities is a necessity. We are less equipped with fewer resources than our urban counterparts to tackle the growing mental health and addictions crisis.

THE ASK

The WOWC continues to emphasize its request for the Province that a specific portion of the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) funding be allocated specifically for small and rural communities.



BACKGROUND

Small and rural municipalities in rural Western Ontario require an increased and consistent fair share in HPP funding given the specific growing strain in these

communities. In some cases, research has demonstrated that the funding delivered is simply not adequate to meet the growing needs in rural areas with respect to homelessness.

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THE ASK

The WOWC continues to advocate for permanent funding for the Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT) programs, through annualized funding and permanently-funded mental health officer positions.

BACKGROUND

The MCRT funding provides critical funding support for our police forces to be paired with experienced mental health professionals in response to the substantial increase in mental health calls. The WOWC has expressed concerns about MCRT funding and the importance of creating permanent funding for this program, especially for small and rural communities, where these teams have had proven success.

Communities and residents in rural Western Ontario have felt the direct benefits from the pairing of specially trained police officers and mental-health professionals to respond to 911 emergency calls involving mental health or addictions.



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Federal, Provincial and municipal partners must continue to work together on priorities, from workforce and housing challenges to social services and health care improvements. Investing in these municipal services will lay foundations for the continued recovery and future prosperity of our communities.



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