

As it has been since its inception, the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC) is a strong partner and supporter of the provincial government.

As the Province of Ontario moves toward municipal and economic recovery, the WOWC's member municipalities will continue to require predictable and sustainable financial support and future investment. This will be critical in the years ahead, as the ability of municipalities to balance budgets and continue to meet service levels remains under pressure – affecting everything from workforce development to infrastructure, and long-term care to social services.

The WOWC requests that the Province continue its excellent collaboration with the member municipalities in Southwestern Ontario, and to use their municipal expertise and collaborative regional power in working through the coming year of

Ontario's collective recovery. Provincial and municipal partners must continue to work together to improve government relations and service delivery in order to benefit the residents and businesses across our communities. Investing in municipal services will help get these communities back to work and will lay foundations for the continued future recovery.

Being part of the process and the conversation will be crucial as we move forward. This strong partnership between our governments will help ensure collective success for both Southwestern Ontario and the Province of Ontario as a whole. Governments need to be all in this together.

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BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT

The WOWC wishes to reiterate its collective support to the provincial government for its continuing efforts to develop broadband internet service both in Southwestern Ontario and across the entire Province.

The government has demonstrated leadership and devoted significant financial resources toward providing high speed fibre access to Ontarians, including with the release of the Ontario 2021 Budget and its landmark \$2.8-billion investment in broadband infrastructure. These efforts are recognized and appreciated and reaffirm the government's strong commitment to broadband.

The WOWC is pleased to share that Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) has now successfully completed the procurement phase of its program and has delivered outstanding results by surpassing all its targeted goals, including:

- premises passed (+27%)
- fibre kilometres of roadway served (+33%)
- total infrastructure investment (+36%)

Furthermore, the SWIFT program has now awarded contracts for 95 projects, totaling \$268 million, in broadband infrastructure improvements, which represents:

- an increase of 36% (or \$71 million) in the program's overall total infrastructure investment budget
- the availability of high-speed internet access to 63,254 households and businesses across the region by 2023

With the support of your government, the WOWC and SWIFT have been successful in helping increase access to high-speed internet service – defined by the national broadband standards as 50Mbps

download and 10Mbps upload (50/10) – to 90% of the residents of Southwestern Ontario. However, like the Province of Ontario, the WOWC and SWIFT also recognize that more still needs to be done.

For that reason, the WOWC and SWIFT are focused on supporting the provincial government in reaching its target – to connect as many Ontarians as possible to high-speed fibre – and wish to reiterate and emphasize their complete support for any effective Provincial funding model that would encourage the expansion of broadband infrastructure in Southwestern Ontario.

To ensure that these critical broadband investments are successfully achieved, regardless of the program selected, the WOWC and SWIFT strongly encourage the Province of Ontario to maximize the amount of fibre available, as well as include the participation of small and local Internet Service Providers (ISPs).



WESTERN ONTARIO WORKFORCE STRATEGY

The WOWC is currently developing the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy and is pleased to present a mid-term project update to the provincial government as part of the AMO 2021 Conference.

Through this project, the WOWC and its partners will complete a comprehensive Workforce Strategy for Western Ontario that validates labour supply and demand at the municipal and regional level.

Using this intelligence to develop an evidence-based workforce strategy will ensure a collaborative approach to creating a skilled, resilient labour force that is poised to meet local employer demand, now and looking forward, and more effectively leverage the workforce planning efforts of community partners and the Province. This strategy, primarily a project to create a regional strategy with a minor in research, is looking at the broad workforce issue of attracting people to the region and retaining them with a focus on housing, education, and quality of life.

Among other things, a working group has been established consisting of the WOWC Economic Development Committee members, and includes support from the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD), EDO, Workforce Planning West, and SWOLIP. The project team is working with Economic Development offices and

Workforce Development boards to gather reports, studies and data for each respective County that have been completed on housing, development charges, and workforce.

Furthermore, in addition to a series of Community Roundtables that occurred in June and July, additional focus groups will be hosted with industry, including manufacturing, agriculture, small business, housing, talent attraction, and people attraction. For more information, a background discussion report is included as part of the briefing package prepared for the AMO 2021 Conference.

The WOWC would like to request the Province's support of the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy and the forthcoming recommendations and actions that will be required following its release, which is including but not limited to further provincial investment in training and promoting opportunities where labour shortages have been identified. These investments and commitments will be critical for post-pandemic planning, in terms of economic recovery.



AFFORDABLE AND ATTAINABLE HOUSING

Housing affordability, particularly in rural areas, continues to remain a strong focus within Southwestern Ontario.

Given the current housing and rental market, it is crucial to focus on increasing the supply of rent geared to income rental housing and community housing so that all Ontarians regardless of income level have a safe place to call home.



This is particularly true in rural areas and is a growing and worrisome trend as the pandemic has continued to evolve, driving more residents away from urban areas and into rural communities. Homelessness is also a growing issue in rural areas across Southwestern Ontario and requires a solution from a provincial housing perspective.

Municipalities and the Province of Ontario require constructive ideas on how to work with developers and non-profit housing corporations to increase affordable housing development. There is a need to enhance affordable housing awareness and education for private developers, the public and municipalities.

Furthermore, the requirements of incentive programs must consider the capacity of smaller, rural developers to increase participation in affordable housing projects. For example, current funding programs have long wait times for payments, resulting in builders being required to cover costs while they wait for funding settlements.

The duration of commitments, timelines for application approvals and economies of scale for the size of the project have been identified as barriers for rural developers. The WOWC therefore recommends that the funding criteria and reimbursement schedules be clear and designed in a way that encourage rural affordable housing investments.

Finally, to minimize and eliminate the difficulties of developing rural affordable housing, it is also recommended that inclusionary zoning be mandated by Provincial stature.

The WOWC appreciates the Province's commitment to reducing delays in the development process and encourages the provincial government to find and fund solutions to the growing housing crisis and homelessness issues across rural Western Ontario. Moving forward, the WOWC would value the opportunity to collaborate with the Province to find these solutions, efficiencies, and improvements in this area.

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