



Friday, February 10, 2023

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat
Frost Building North, 3rd Floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1Z1

Re: WOWC Submission to Provincial 2023 Budget Consultations

Dear Minister Bethlenfalvy,

On behalf of the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC), thank you for this opportunity to provide a submission to the Provincial government on the Ontario 2023 Budget consultations.

The WOWC is a not-for-profit organization representing 15 upper and single-tier municipalities and 1.5 million residents across Southwestern Ontario, aiming to enhance the prosperity and overall well-being of rural and small urban communities across the region.

As always, the WOWC is a strong partner and supporter of the provincial government, and our members look forward to continuing the excellent collaboration between the Province of Ontario and the municipalities in Southwestern Ontario.

Together, both levels of government must use their expertise and collective regional knowledge to work through our mutual priorities – from workforce and housing challenges to social services and health care improvements. Investing in municipal services will lay foundations for the continued recovery and future prosperity of our communities.

Mental Health and Addictions in Rural Areas

The mental health and addictions epidemic is deeply affecting and impacting the communities in small and rural communities, which have even fewer resources to tackle this growing problem. The Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Solicitor General (SOLGEN) must be on board as full partners, particularly in our small communities, where a lack of access to adequate community health services – and integrated mental health and addictions services – are major barriers to reducing homelessness and poverty.

The WOWC's meetings with regional stakeholders have revealed the excellent collaboration and multi-partner efforts that are being undertaken in rural Southwestern Ontario to address the growing mental health and addictions crisis. One of the best examples of such partnerships are the Mobile Crisis Response Teams (MCRT) – also known under various other names – which combine front-line OPP officers with mental-health workers, to apply new approaches to police interventions and provide additional support and follow-up to individuals.

However, regional OPP detachments and their partners have expressed their concern that the MCRT programs are currently funded on a case-by-case basis, through application-based provincial funding from MOH and SOLGEN. The WOWC therefore requests the permanence of these programs – through annualized funding and permanently-funded mental health officer positions – using a formula based on the number of calls, population size, and geographic area.

This permanent, predictable funding would provide much-needed stability to our partners providing these services to our communities. These service providers are stretched thin and have noted that these programs could eventually be expanded to provide more resources – in some cases up to 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Investment in Rural Cellular Infrastructure

The provincial government has demonstrated leadership and has devoted significant financial resources toward providing high-speed internet and cellular access to Ontarians. These efforts are recognized and appreciated and reaffirm the Province's strong commitment to broadband and cellular infrastructure.

The WOWC and the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) team are currently undertaking a due diligence exercise in Southwestern Ontario, to determine the magnitude of the cellular gap in our region. Given the strong support that the government has shown for these improvements throughout the Province, the WOWC and SWIFT are seeking project funding from both levels of government. The total provincial ask is \$90 million to \$95 million.

SWIFT is currently working to complete the required due diligence exercise, which is due at the end Q2 2023. The goal is to provide 5G coverage throughout the region, which is critical for economic growth and development. The benefits of 5G include capacity (not simply coverage), in addition to latency as well as traffic management and prioritization.

The project will descope any improvements already being implemented by the carriers in their three-year plan. Preliminary numbers include a requirement for approximately 275 new towers, and upgrades to 50 existing towers, for a total estimated construction cost of \$320 million to \$340 million. The subsidy requirement is therefore estimated at between 50% to 60%.

It is worth noting that the \$23 million in project administration fees would be entirely absorbed by the municipalities. Assuming that the project funding is in place by the end of 2024, the project would begin in 2025 with a completion date of 2029.

In conclusion, 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.

Sincerely,

Warden Glen McNeil
Chair, Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus