



Thursday, March 21, 2024

Hon. Lisa Thompson
Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
c/o Business Climate and Rural Policy Unit
1 Stone Road West, 2NE
Guelph, Ontario
N1G 4Y2

Delivered via email to: ruralplan@ontario.ca

Re: Western Ontario Warden's Caucus Rural Strategy Submission

Dear Minister Thompson,

Minister Thompson, thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to help inform the creation of a Rural Economic Development Strategy.

The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC) represents the interests of the 15 upper-tier and single-tier counties in rural Western Ontario, including 300 communities within its geographic boundaries and 1.5 million people to whom the region is home.

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. This partnership between our governments will help ensure collective success for both rural Western Ontario and the Province of Ontario as a whole. Governments need to be all in this together.

Please see our answers below to the consultation questions that have been posed.

What is the most pressing economic obstacle or opportunity in your community or across rural Ontario? Why?

Workforce.

The Western Ontario Wardens region is expected to grow significantly in the coming years, based on estimates by EMSI, and by the provincial Ministry of Finance and its official population projections. Using EMSI employment forecasts for the region (excluding the separated cities), total employment is expected to increase by over 51,000 through 2030, a growth rate of 8%.

The sectors with the fastest expected growth over this period are health care, construction, manufacturing, retail trade and administrative and support services.

The larger requirement for new workers will come from replacement demand, replacing those leaving the workforce through retirement. The potential loss across the region could be close to 163,000 workforce participants. If the share of workers expected to retire over the 2020-2030 timeframe continues at the current pace, it would remove 163,000 people from the workforce.

Combined the growth demand of new and expanding firms and replacement demand, will create 213,900 jobs over the 2020-2030 period that must be filled.

Of note, these numbers do not include large investment announcements in Western Ontario such as Volkswagen, Stellantis and Bruce Power expansion, which will increase the pressures on the workforce for the region.

How can communities and government work together to improve local economies or better support local businesses?

There are many different stakeholders involved in workforce development across the WOWC region including educational institutions, industry associations, training companies and employers. Increasingly, although it is not a traditional role for local government, communities are taking on a greater role in this area as the shortage of workers is becoming a barrier to economic growth and community vibrancy.

The WOWC recommends four areas of focus that must be addressed to be successful in achieving growth in our rural workforce.

Workforce Retention and Attraction

Workforce retention and attraction is focused on collective efforts to attract population and workers to the region. Across the region employers are facing workforce strategies that have the potential to limit the region's economic prosperity. The municipalities must put a focus on attracting workers to fill occupations in demand. Retention is equally important. Thousands of people move out of the region every year, particularly young people. They need to be engaged and have a good understanding of the career opportunities at home.

Examples of actions include;

- More childcare support across the region to foster greater workforce participation.
- External marketing/promotion of career and job opportunities available in rural Western Ontario, to outside the region – in Ontario, across Canada and beyond.

Leveraging Existing Population

Leveraging the existing population includes efforts to ensure our post-secondary education system is aligned with workforce demand and working closely with employers across the region. It also involves engaging with youth in high school and even younger to expose them to career opportunities at home. We want our young people to stay and help build strong communities for the next generation. Leveraging existing population includes supporting people who have struggled to attach to the labour market or who might start to work under the right conditions. This includes older workers and persons with barriers to employment.

Examples of actions include;

- Young people in the region need greater exposure to local careers and career paths. Even if they leave for education or a first job, they should be targets.
- There should be better coordination between the post-secondary education (PSE) sector and workforce demand. This is particularly true for strategically important sectors including agriculture, manufacturing and health care but applies to all industries.
- There may be opportunities to increase the participation of under-represented groups in the workforce such as individuals with physical disabilities.

Attainable Housing

Attainable housing is fundamental to sustainable population and economic growth across the WOWC region. Many of the jobs that will need to be filled in the coming years are not high paying jobs. Many families are already feeling the sting of high shelter costs. Attainable housing doesn't necessarily mean subsidized, but it does mean a broad mix of options to meet the demand of local families and those moving into the region. Establishing the right policy framework, coupled with an engaged and aligned real estate development community providing innovative and compelling housing options will be key.

Examples of action include;

- Alignment between the local workforce need and identifying the most relevant housing format.
- Model policy development for local municipalities.
- Engagement with the housing industry support growth, access to resources and other tools needed to scale up and meet demand across the region.
- Managing data to track housing need and uptake.
- PSE student housing must be part of any overall housing strategy.

Employer Recruitment and Retention

Employer recruitment and retention recognizes that many of our firms need to elevate their recruitment, retention and human resources practices. Smaller firms may not have the internal capacity to address the recruitment challenges. Some employers may need to raise wages or offer better benefits. Others may need to be more flexible with work hours. Most will need to engage more with experiential learning. Employers large and small will have to do a better job if they are to recruit and retain a strong workforce and combined, ensure that the region's economy continues to grow.

Examples of action include;

- Companies/organizations need to be open to fostering a more flexible and welcoming workforce. This includes remote/hybrid working where possible, modifying shiftwork to accommodate young families, adjusting shifts/work week to accommodate older workers, embracing equity, diversity and inclusion principles and offering a broader range of non-salary benefits.
- Many companies/organizations need to do a better job of laying out the career path for new hires. Many of the jobs going unfilled are entry level and more work should be done to show new hires what the options are if they perform well in the jobs. In many sectors this could include owning their own business one day.

What changes has your community experienced in the last few years that have presented new opportunities for economic growth? And how can the province help you take advantage of those opportunities?

As noted earlier Western Ontario has had three significant investment announcements in the past 18 months with Volkswagen, Stellantis and the Bruce Power expansion.

These investments present incredible opportunity in the West for our rural communities to grow and prosper. Infrastructure is a necessity to ensure the success of these investments in our region. Access to natural gas and electricity throughout Western Ontario and the entire Province are critical to our rural growth. The Province can assist in taking advantage of this growth by investing in our rural infrastructure to ensure the viability and longevity of our communities.

What is of utmost importance is that we ensure that our economies remain diversified including a focus and protection of agricultural land. The landscape across rural Western Ontario includes significant swaths of rural and agricultural lands, including prime agricultural areas. The WOWC therefore agrees with comments expressed by our rural municipal members and partners that the protection of Ontario's prime agricultural areas for their long-term agricultural use must be a key objective.

Ontario's agricultural lands are a finite and shrinking resource. The province cannot continue to lose valuable agricultural land – which produces and supplies food, fibre, and fuel, among other things.

Proposals to increase investments and housing must be done in careful consideration of the protection of agricultural lands. Less than five per cent of Ontario's land base is prime agricultural lands (OMAFRA, 2016). According to Ontario Farmland Trust, Ontario is already losing 319 acres of farmland every day, as it is transitioned to other uses.

OMAFRA has a key role to play in being the rural voice at Queen's Park and at the policy table to ensure that decisions made do not negatively impact rural Ontario and our ability to provide food, fibre and fuel for the entire Province.

Conclusion

As always, the WOWC appreciates the opportunity to comment on the rural economic development strategy and looks forward to working with the provincial government and our municipal counterparts in growing our rural communities and protecting Western Ontario's agricultural land.

Thank you in advance for your collaboration and your attention to this matter. On behalf of the WOWC and its constituents, we look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glen McNeil". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Glen McNeil,
Chair, Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus