

 <p>WESTERN ONTARIO WOWC WARDENS CAUCUS</p>	<p>Meeting with Hon. Lisa Thompson Minister of Rural Affairs</p> <p>Monday, August 18, 2025 1:45 PM – 2:00 PM</p>
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Chair Amy Martin:

Minister Thompson, thank you for making time for this conversation. It is always a pleasure to meet with you and we appreciate your support as both a Minister and an MPP in our region.

As you know, Western Ontario is one of the fastest-growing regions across the province, and your government has supported this by bringing some major economic investments to the area over the last few years – upwards of \$40 billion and requiring 30,000+ new jobs.

That’s been fantastic, but it has also led to some new challenges, particularly around infrastructure, housing, workforce, and mental health. These are the four core priorities we've outlined in the WOWC’s 2025-2027 Priorities, which we shared with you at Queen’s Park a few months ago.

In fact, our population growth and new housing starts are outpacing Toronto, Hamilton, and even the provincial average.

This growth has made us an even more critical part of Ontario’s economy – and indeed Ontario’s economic engine. In 2022, our region hit \$226 billion in exports, with: \$145 billion or 64% from manufacturing and \$12 billion from agriculture.

Vice-Chair Kevin Marriott:

Given the current global trade challenges, we recognize the importance of ongoing trade policy efforts. The WOWC recently conducted a Tariff Impact Survey, which highlighted that a significant number of businesses rely on trade with the U.S. for at least 25% of their revenue. In fact, many of them anticipate worsening supply chain disruptions in the coming years.

To address these challenges, WOWC is leading a regional Supply Chain Mapping Project, and we are preparing an application to the Trade-Impacted Communities Program to better support our local businesses and boost economic growth. We will lead this regional project along with partners such as local Economic Development Officers, Chambers of Commerce, industry

associations, and post-secondary institutions. We look forward to sharing our insights to support our economy.

The WOWC is also the lead municipal partner with the Canadian Centre for Resilient Rural Communities – a groundbreaking initiative housed in the Ontario Agricultural College at the University of Guelph.

The Centre is dedicated to gathering and analyzing rural data to sustain, track, and support thriving small and rural communities. The result is further empowering rural communities with credible data and analytics that will better inform policies and programs designed to improve their health, well-being, and resilience.

Chair Amy Martin:

WOWC is also looking at establishing a regional rural transit authority – through a model similar to SWIFT – to help improve inter-community mobility. Currently, there is a lack of funding for rural transit; as an example, transit operational funding is \$191 per resident in the GTA, whereas this drops to \$13 in Huron-Bruce or \$14 in Windsor-Sarnia.

There are partners in WOWC who have existing transit – Norfolk, Oxford, Middlesex, and Grey-Wellington-Dufferin – so we fit the need, and we'd love your support in championing that.

We also have lots of land – within the WOWC catchment area, there are 66 properties (buildings and sites) listed on the Invest Ontario Partner Portal, for a total of just under 5,000 acres.

- Sixteen of those properties are equal to or larger than 100 acres.
- The WOWC catchment area represents 47% of the available land on the portal.

Finally, as it pertains to rural housing, we are planning to share a few suggestions with Minister Flack later today to further help rural Ontario. We'd love your support on these:

- **Rural Infrastructure Support Fund:** A dedicated fund to help small municipalities bridge the infrastructure gap, particularly when DCs are limited.
- **Rural DC Advisory Committee:** A mechanism within MMAH to ensure rural voices are part of housing policy development.

And finally:

We have been meeting regularly – every other month – with your Chief of Staff – as per your suggestion when we met at AMO last summer.

Your former Director of Policy flagged the MRA Funders Forum for us, and we're now in the process of bringing it to Western Ontario.

We were pleased to attend the Rural Ontario Development Program announcement with you and are busy promoting it across the region.

And we created a slogan: "Powering Ontario's Economic Engine."

What can we work on next?