

 <p>WESTERN ONTARIO WOWC WARDENS CAUCUS</p>	<p>Meeting with Ontario Liberal Party</p> <p>Monday, August 18, 2025 10:00 AM – 10:15 AM</p>
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Introduction (Vice-Chair Marriott)

Good morning, and thank you for making time to meet.

The WOWC represents 15 counties and 117 municipalities across rural Western Ontario. As you know, our 2025-2027 priorities were launched at Queen's Park earlier this year and reflect the reality on the ground in our region – namely, that Western Ontario is Ontario's economic engine. Our region is positioned for tremendous growth, with over \$40 billion in new investments, particularly in the electric vehicle and clean energy sectors.

We appreciated the presence of MPP Dr. Adil Shamji to speak on behalf of the Ontario Liberal Party during our event. Today, we'd like to spend a bit of time reviewing the core areas of our strategic priorities – infrastructure, housing, workforce, and mental health.

Infrastructure Development and Funding (Warden Ryan)

Infrastructure is critical as we prepare for this growth. Rural municipalities face unique challenges in funding and maintaining infrastructure, but we view this as an opportunity for collaboration. We're ready to partner with the Province on strategic infrastructure planning – especially in areas like roads, utilities, and broadband.

Additionally, we're exploring innovative solutions such as a regional rural transit authority to enhance inter-community mobility, similar to the SWIFT model. 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.

Available Land for Development (Vice-Chair Marriott)

Western Ontario has significant land available for development, and we are ready to support Ontario's economic growth. More than \$40 billion in new investments have already flowed into our region from major employers like

Power Co and Bruce Power. In collaboration with Dr. Ryan Gibson of the University of Guelph, we've created a Blueprint for Prosperity, examining how rural communities can benefit from these investments.

As new investments increase, so do the needs for infrastructure – roads, hydroelectricity, natural gas, water, and wastewater. To capitalize on this opportunity, we must streamline land-use processes and remove barriers to development. For example, the Western Sarnia-Lambton Research Park is a ready-to-go catalyst for economic growth and innovation, and we're actively seeking tenants.

Finally, regarding available 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. And:

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

Housing Affordability and Availability (Warden Ryan)

Western Ontario's population growth far outpaces other parts of the province. Between 2016 and 2021, our population grew by 7.8%, compared to 5.8% provincially and 2.3% in Toronto. We also saw a 28% increase in housing units during this period, which is significantly higher than the 17% in Toronto. This rapid growth is a sign of vitality, but it also underscores the critical need for affordable housing.

And while Bill 17 has helped urban municipalities, rural municipalities face a different reality. While large municipalities can collect \$100,000+ per unit in development charges, many of our members collect little or none.

In 2022, 76 of our 117 municipalities collected DCs; this dropped to 64 municipalities in 2023, accounting for just over half. The average DC collected in 2023 for a single-detached home was \$9,979 – significantly less than the amounts collected in nearby urban areas.

As a measure to help rural Ontario, we're asking the Province to allow municipalities to withhold occupancy permits until DCs are paid in full. By doing so, we ensure that growth pays for growth – before the keys are handed over.

This wouldn't introduce new charges, just ensure compliance with existing rules. Right now, developers can reach occupancy before paying, leaving municipalities on the hook for services like water, fire, and roads – without

the funds to cover the costs.

Workforce Development and Retention (Warden Ryan)

The future of our region depends on a skilled workforce. New investments in the clean energy and electric vehicle sectors are creating thousands of jobs. However, we also face challenges in workforce retention and expansion. Our Western Ontario Workforce Strategy identified a need for 214,000 new employees by 2030, and with recent investments, that number has grown to 245,000.

Whether through educational partnerships or workforce training programs, we need to ensure our workers have the skills needed for these jobs, particularly in manufacturing, healthcare, and advanced technologies.

Mental Health Services and Supports (Vice-Chair Marriott)

Mental health is another area where we see tremendous opportunity for collaboration. We are looking for pilot programs to improve mental health services in rural Ontario, including secure funding for wraparound community supports in small and rural communities, akin to the HART hub model. It's worth noting that there are five HART hubs in the WOWC region, but some had to begin operations using municipal dollars given the urgency.

A great example of successful collaboration is the funding for the mobile crisis response team in Lambton County, which pairs community paramedics with mental health crisis workers. This initiative has yielded excellent results in addressing mental health crises with the help of local partners.

Impacts of Tariffs and Trade Policy on Western Ontario (Warden Ryan)

Western Ontario remains Ontario's economic engine, with \$226 billion in exports in 2022. Manufacturing accounted \$145 billion, while agriculture represented \$12 billion. However, trade risks, particularly with the U.S., present challenges for our region. The WOWC's recent Tariff Impact Survey revealed that many businesses depend on U.S. trade for at least 25% of their revenue, and most anticipate worsening supply chain disruptions in the coming years.

To address these challenges, WOWC is leading a regional Supply Chain Mapping Project and preparing an application to the Trade-Impacted Communities Program. We will lead this regional project along with partners

such as local Economic Development Officers, Chambers of Commerce, industry associations, and post-secondary institutions.

Conclusion (Vice-Chair Marriott)

Western Ontario is ready for the future. We have the land, the workforce, and the ambition to be a key player in Ontario's growth – we are Ontario's economic engine. Thank you again for your time, and we are excited about what we can achieve together.