



For our Future in Rural Ontario: Proposals for Prosperity in Ontario's Small Towns, A Discussion Paper

Politicians like to talk about Rural Ontario as if there is one place in the province that is rural or that the collection of diverse communities across the province have the exact same interests. But they don't. Small towns across this province are unique communities, with their own unique challenges and opportunities.

While they may have much in common, we must ensure that we're working to address each community's unique circumstances by seeking their insights, rather than creating broad, sweeping policies that come from an office building in Toronto without local input.

My team has been growing rapidly since I began this journey, and I'm grateful for the incredible advice I've been getting from many rural Ontarans. This paper reflects months of dialogue about the challenges that small communities face across Ontario and proposes some potential solutions. It's my hope that with your input we can improve upon these ideas and help all communities meet their needs and succeed - for their future, and for Ontario's.

More Decision-Making Power for Rural Ontario

Challenge: For far too long, challenges and issues raised by local communities are sometimes heard and less often understood by those in power. Decisions about how Government funds can help build and support small communities have often been made without asking the people who will be affected.

Proposed Solutions:

- Establish the Rural Ontario Development Authority. The Board should include mayors, wardens, reeves, and other leaders from small communities across Ontario.
 - Their mandate would be to ensure that small communities are adequately consulted on major funding programs, including those managed by the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Infrastructure.
 - Consulting the Authority would be mandatory for any significant expenditure of public funds

Addressing Population Loss

Challenge: The GTA is Ontario's fastest growing region and is projected to surpass 50% of the Province's total population by 2033. Meanwhile, particularly in Northern and Eastern Ontario, many communities are experiencing net population losses rather than growth. These communities are typically losing young Ontarians who are moving away from their communities, creating challenges for businesses and the broader community

Proposed Solutions:



- A dedicated Rural Ontario Nominee Program that integrates with the [Federal Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot](#), to encourage and support new Canadians to permanently settle in areas experiencing population losses.
 - This would include a specific focus on areas where there are critical shortages of healthcare and other necessary professionals.
- Moving beyond succession planning guides towards succession planning solutions.
 - Consulting on Ontario's tax codes to ensure there is favourable treatment for those wishing to sell businesses and those seeking to buy them.
 - Developing a portal to match people seeking to purchase businesses with people seeking to sell them. The Portal would work with the Post Secondary Education sector to connect businesses to new graduates and research to support succession planning.
- Forgiving all student debt for new graduates who take jobs in rural communities and stay for a minimum of 5 years.
- Exploring tools to help revitalize main streets across Ontario to provide amenities and opportunities for people of all ages.

Income Inequality

Challenge: Simply put, incomes are not keeping pace with the cost of living in many small communities, including those facing above average unemployment rates. People are having trouble finding work and getting access to the training they need. As a result, for many rural Ontarians it is becoming more difficult to afford housing, transportation and other daily needs.

Proposed Solutions:

- Basic Income plan
 - Our plan is modelled off of the Ontario Pilot Program. In Lindsay, ON, one of the pilot sites, Over 1,800 people were benefiting from the program before Doug Ford's Conservatives cut it.
 - A basic income replaces many administratively complicated social assistance programs with one easy income supplement that ensures recipients are living above the poverty line.
 - There is a growing body of research to suggest that this program saves government time and money and better addresses the needs of the people using the program.
 - This was the case for Ontario. A survey conducted of participants found that 32% of participants surveyed were able to go to school to upgrade their skills and over 20% said that they now could afford transportation to and from work.
 - According to the survey, one participant said: "I even got my license for the first time because of this pilot thing... no work in this city in my field so without this I will be homeless again."



- Universal Childcare
 - My plan will ensure that communities across Ontario have better access to full time licensed childcare. This will give parents the freedom to invest more time in their business, career or skills training. It will also guarantee that every parent in rural Ontario will have access to high quality early childhood education, a key driver in a child's future success.

Government Services That Don't Meet Local Needs

Challenge: Decisions about how money is being spent are often made with cities and suburbs in mind, but those decisions have profound effects on our smaller communities, often leaving them with critical funding short-falls or insufficient services.

Proposed Solutions:

- *Learning Together: A Plan to Merge our Catholic and non-Catholic school boards*
 - Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in our education system.
 - Rural Ontarians expect that, regardless of faith, all their children will have access to high-quality public education.
 - Currently, students in small towns are being bused to neighbouring communities, several kilometers away, just because the publicly funded school in their town excludes them based on their faith. This divides communities, is extremely inefficient, doesn't benefit the students and is bad for the environment.
 - My *Learning Together* plan will ensure that rural communities have access to higher quality education, closer to home, by ensuring that children aren't separated based on their faith.
 - It will mean more resources are put into rural classrooms, delivering better outcomes for rural students.
- High Quality Internet:
 - Through the Rural Ontario Development Authority we will seek to partner with the private sector to provide high-quality internet connectivity to all communities. But, **If they won't build it, we'll build it ourselves.**
 - If traditional approaches continue to fail to deliver high-quality internet where it is needed, the government would seek to develop a new public utility, The Rural Ontario Internet Provider (ROIP).
 - The ROIP's mandate will be to partner with Infrastructure Ontario, large and small telecommunications companies, municipalities, local communities, and other public entities that own land across Ontario (such as Ontario Hydro), to once and for all bring high-speed internet to Ontario's small communities.
 - This will be the first public utility in Ontario with an exclusive focus on small communities.
 - The focus on small communities will also inform the location of staff and administrators of this utility and could be a source of good public sector jobs for smaller communities.