

Association of Municipalities of Ontario
2013 Annual Conference

Remarks by the Honourable Linda Jeffrey
Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Tuesday, August 20, 2013
1:25 p.m.

Check against delivery

Thank you.

Thank you for coming to Ottawa to take part in this important annual event.

I want also to thank the AMO executive and staff who have worked over the last few months to put this conference together.

And I'd also like to thank Russ Powers, for his time and advocacy over the past year – and for his leadership at our regular monthly meetings.

I have been coming to AMO since I was first elected in the early 1990's but this is my first time up here at the podium as the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

I have to admit it's a little intimidating; but it gives me a different perspective.

Shortly after being made minister, I threw myself into the job and I went to as many spring conferences, meetings and AGMs as possible.

At each of those events, you shared with me your concerns and I appreciated your candour. It is clear to me that you truly care about the communities you represent.

And that's a passion we share. As a former city councillor, I know first-hand about the hard work every one of you puts into making your communities a better place to live.

I've learned over the years – it's a small world, so it's important to be respectful and to build strong relationships.

I've always believed that the best solutions start out with an honest conversation.

That is why our Government's relationship with AMO has been so productive. Both sides have never shied away from the big issues, or from giving difficult advice.

I will admit, it's not always easy to hear that a program isn't working but together we both make better decisions by taking the time to listen to each other.

It's because we both benefit so much from these conversations that today I am proud to sign a renewed Memorandum of Understanding.

Today's MOU renewal will ensure that these conversations continue. It will also allow us to build on the successes we have had in the recent past and to pave the way to a strong future.

I'm sure you will agree that one of our greatest shared successes is the uploading of social assistance benefits and court security costs that had previously been borne by municipalities.

As you know, this year alone, these uploads have already produced savings of \$1.4 billion.

These savings provide the fiscal room that you need.

We took action because you told us that it just wasn't fair – it wasn't reasonable to download costs to the property tax base.

So we took steps to restore fairness.

You also told us that you need strong roads and bridges, as well as the dollars to maintain them.

So we acted... by reconfirming our government's plan to invest \$35 billion in infrastructure over the next three years.

And then we committed to an additional \$100 million dollars for a roads and bridges fund for small, rural and northern communities across the province.

Because of that strong working relationship, we've been able to see real results on building code and fire safety improvements; on economic development and youth job creation; and on social service reform and waste diversion.

Our Government made these changes to assist you in making our communities more livable.

But we know there's more work to be done.

In particular, more needs to be done on the affordable housing file.

The simple fact is - Ontario needs more affordable housing. It creates jobs and it grows the economy.

When families have a home to call their own, they have improved health, education and employment.

In this country, far too many people spend the day unsure where they will sleep at night.

A recent report estimated that over 200,000 Canadians go homeless every year. In a prosperous country like Canada, **that's just shameful.**

In March, Ottawa announced a five-year renewal of the Investment in Affordable Housing program.

I'll admit I was afraid they might not even make that commitment.

But, despite this announcement, we still see a gradual withdrawal by the Federal government from their role in working with other levels of government on this file.

It's become clear that if action isn't taken, their commitment to affordable and social housing will evaporate over the next 20 years.

The reality is that a strong national economy depends on a healthy housing market that serves **all** Canadians.

This summer, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities issued a statement supporting our call for a long-term federal commitment on housing.

The need for housing is not just a municipal issue, it's not just a provincial issue and it's not just a federal issue.

It is a societal issue that all levels of government need to tackle; together!

To achieve our shared goals, I need your help - I need your help in convincing Ottawa and your local MPs to stay at the table and work with us.

But it is not just housing where we need to work together to make our communities more livable.

We need to work together to address our long-term infrastructure needs and we can't do this without an inventory of our assets.

In Ontario we know climate change is a significant issue. The effects of climate change can bring unexpected damage to our homes, our property and the infrastructure we rely upon.

Over the past year, communities across Ontario have been hit by devastating floods— from Thunder Bay and Wawa, to Huntsville, and Kawartha Lakes.

Upon hearing the news, my staff were on the ground working with municipal officials.

We committed up to \$18 million to help with the response and infrastructure repair costs for the municipalities hardest hit.

And we continue to work closely with the eight affected municipalities and their local Disaster Relief Committees.

I want to commend the efforts of all the first responders and public works officials for supporting their communities during an extremely difficult period.

I was able to see firsthand an Emergency Operations Centre in action in the town of Bracebridge and I was impressed with what I saw.

Disasters showcase the strength of our communities but they can sometimes expose gaps in our existing infrastructure.

They remind us that we've got to take stock and continually evaluate our roads, bridges and other structures.

It's all about planning ahead.

That's why our government places so much weight on asset management plans. I just can't stress enough how important it is for each municipality to develop a plan.

When our Government released the Municipal Infrastructure Strategy last year, a significant number of you took the time to prepare a comprehensive asset management plan.

I'm pleased that so many municipalities have taken advantage of the new resources, including \$9 million dollars in funding and staff resources to get these plans done.

I know there's a lot of work involved in completing these plans. But I think you'll agree –it's the right thing to do and there's a significant pay-off.

We're here to support you in your infrastructure planning, and, as we move forward, we will continue the push to get all levels of government moving in the same direction.

With sound asset management plans, all levels of Government will be better positioned to invest in the projects and priorities that will help you improve our communities.

We'll be better able to target our investments, which in the long run saves us all money.

In fact, I believe we have an obligation to ensure our children and grandchildren aren't left with aging or worn out infrastructure.

The global economic downturn has meant that all levels of Government have had to do more with less.

We're all doing our best to practice financial restraint.

Sharing services is one way to provide relief to our strained budgets.

Of course, I don't have to tell you, sharing services between municipalities is nothing new or unique.

The overwhelming majority of municipalities already have some sort of shared service agreement.

The benefits can be great: from cutting costs and increasing efficiency, to greater local autonomy for you to plan and achieve the priorities that you set.

I want to showcase a few examples where communities are being innovative:

The Peel Public Sector Network was developed by the Region of Peel, Mississauga, Caledon and Brampton – my hometown – to provide a high-speed fibre optic network to municipalities, hospitals and educational institutions.

The Network saves \$2.5 million annually and has won the Showcase Ontario Merit Award for delivering vital public services to the community in a cost-efficient, convenient and effective way.

This is a great example of inter-government collaboration and co-operation that saves money.

Another successful model is the Fire and Emergency Services Communications Centre of the City of Oshawa.

The Centre handles dispatch services for the City of Oshawa, the Municipality of Clarington, the Town of Whitby, the Township of Brock and the Township of Scugog.

Emergency services are an ever-increasing cost for municipalities.

The Oshawa centre is a state-of-the-art facility with industry-leading technology. If each municipality had put the dollars in to build this technology, it would have cost significantly more.

That kind of proactive, creative thinking naturally leads to the development and sharing of best practices for fire dispatch communications.

It also creates the potential for additional revenue sources.

And there are ways that we at the provincial government can help you too.

One example of improved financial planning that we have been working on, with the Municipal Finance Officers Association, is a program called the Costs of Development Model.

This program allows municipalities to compare the costs associated with different types of development, so that you can compare between low density and compact urban development forms.

With this program, you can get a better look at your overall planning picture by seeing the potential financial implications of planning decisions 10, 15 and even 20 years down the road.

We will be working with our partners to pilot this tool with a select group of municipalities, so stay tuned. We'll let you know when the tool will be available for your use.

My ministry wants to support you in delivering services and infrastructure more efficiently and we want to help you find the right tools and practices to do that because we know one size does not fit all.

We want to make the tools you have available more accessible, including ones you use for planning.

Over the years, we've brought in reforms to improve both the land use planning system and the Ontario Municipal Board.

We have worked together to bring forward an historic vision for land use planning through the Growth Plan and the Greenbelt.

But we've heard from you and we've heard from the public that the rules can sometimes be too complex and the delays and appeals can be frustrating.

This frequently contributes to conflicts between municipalities, developers and community groups.

Our government wants to address these concerns, and we're committed to improving the land-use planning and the decision-making process.

This fall, my ministry will begin a consultation process to enable municipalities, community groups, and stakeholders to give us feedback and help us develop solutions.

We want to make it simpler and more effective. We have heard your concerns and we will be reviewing the process for land use planning appeals at the Ontario Municipal Board.

We want to find ways to make our land-use planning system better, to foster better co-operation between municipalities, developers and community groups so they can work together to make those tough decisions.

Finally, I'd like to talk about the Development Charges Act and other costs associated with development.

Earlier this month, my staff and I hosted a forum on planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. We heard some great ideas on how we can improve the Development Charges Act.

I know that, as municipal leaders, you feel the current system limits your ability to recover all capital costs for some services and your ability to pay for vital infrastructure projects.

And I have heard from developers that they want more accountability and transparency.

Everyone who sits at the table wants more clarity when it comes to the costs government imposes.

We believe it's time for a refresh – it's time to be sure the system still answers all our needs.

This fall, we are going to begin the process to evaluate development charges to ensure it is still responsive to the changing needs of your communities.

We'll be contacting you to discuss such changes as section 37 and parkland dedication under the Planning Act.

And we will work with AMO to ensure that you, our municipal partners, stay engaged throughout the process.

If you know me, you know that I like to think I'm a good listener.

I want to hear from you – because no one knows the people in your communities better than you do.

You've fought for them through adversity, and I know we can – and will – work together on the challenges coming down the road.

As our local leaders, you will face the expected obstacles – like working to improve services while keeping costs down.

And you'll encounter unforeseen hurdles – like the ones mother nature sometimes can throw at us.

You need to be able to anticipate both, and as much as possible you have to look 10, 20 years down the road, and make plans for every contingency. I know it's not an easy task.

But I want you to know that your government stands with you. We will work with you and all of our province's communities.

Not just for today, but for the decades to come.

Thank you.