

Remarks by AMO President Colin Best
2023 ROMA Conference
Monday, January 23, 2023 – 4:05 to 4:15 p.m.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon, everyone.

I am pleased to join you today, at my first ROMA Conference as AMO President.

I want to congratulate the ROMA Board for the conference and the important work they do.

I also want to thank everyone who has made the time to be here today.

There is still much more to come – including hearing from Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister, Steve Clark, and the Ministers' Forum.

The ROMA Conference – like the AMO Conference - is an important moment in Ontario's public policy calendar.

It is a moment of important accountability in the provincial-municipal relationship.

That is especially true of the ministers' forum and the many delegation meetings that are such an important part of our conferences.

These are features of a strong and accountable relationship that serves our communities well.

A lot has happened since the AMO conference in August.

For some of us, this is the first chance to reconnect. For others it is an opportunity to welcome you to Council – and to the AMO family.

AMO works hard to support ROMA – and rural Ontario.

We support you as elected officials – by providing advocacy, research, insightful analysis, and training.

We support your municipality by providing all of that, and much more.

I appreciate that municipal governments are the closest to the people, and the most trusted order of government.

Municipalities provide the services that people and businesses rely on most.

They are accountable for the social, environmental, and economic wellbeing of our communities.

Our communities, and our local and regional economies, are the foundation of the provincial and national economies, and the reason that Canada and Ontario are attractive destinations for investment and people.

And here in Ontario, municipalities collectively invest \$60 billion a year in the economy through spending on key public services and public infrastructure.

By any measure, we are a partner in Ontario's prosperity.

It's why we are so eager to work in partnership with the Government of Ontario:

- to advance shared interests; and
- to take on the big problems and challenges that confront modern economies and advancing jurisdictions.

It is certainly what we did throughout the pandemic.

All orders of government worked together to keep Ontario safe and to safeguard the economy.

Much of the heavy lifting was done by municipalities with the federal and provincial governments offsetting the added costs and financial impacts on municipal budgets.

It was about real collaboration, and partnership, in the service of the people of Ontario.

The provincial government's legislative agenda in late 2022 put that relationship under considerable strain.

That agenda fundamentally altered the legislative framework in Ontario for:

- land use planning,
- environmental protection,
- growth and development,
- infrastructure financing, and
- municipal governance.

With all of that in the first 6 months of a new mandate, you have to ask yourself, what's next?

Let me tell you what AMO believes needs to come next.

What needs to come next is:

- a commitment from the province to work *with* municipalities on the implementation of legislative changes;
- real collaboration with municipalities on the implementation of the province's commitment to fully offset the financial losses associated with Bill 23; and
- openness to reversing legislative changes that have unintended consequences.

And there is another important thing the government can do - and must do - without delay.

We need to hear from the province that the next assessment update will occur without further delay.

A well-functioning, up-to-date assessment system is the foundation of the municipal tax system that supports strong, vibrant, and growing communities.

Ontario's assessment system works well and provides municipalities with a stable and predictable source of revenue.

Just as important, it provides stability and predictability for residential and commercial property taxpayers.

We recognize how important it was to pause reassessment during the height of the pandemic.

The important work of the next reassessment can be another example of a municipal-provincial partnership to keep Ontario moving forward and to building a strong foundation for economic growth.

I believe municipal government can lead on many matters, and that we need to rise to the occasion – once again. And I am truly optimistic that we can get the job done.

To succeed, Ontario's municipal leaders must work together.

AMO provides the opportunity to do that.

Our 2023 strategic objectives likely reflect your own.

They include housing and homelessness, municipal infrastructure, and climate change, and advancing a more integrated approach to health and human services policy.

Housing is top of mind across the sector. The pace and scale of changes to Provincial planning legislation has been hard to manage.

I know it is especially challenging for small and rural municipal governments that have limited staff and capacity.

Both AMO and ROMA are concerned about the potential for serious, unintended consequences of some of the changes.

That is why we are calling for meaningful consultation with municipalities and other stakeholders in 2023.

We all need to work together to build housing for all Ontarians.

Municipalities need clarity on the new rules – and a renewed focus on improving the entire system. That includes the province itself and the development industry

We cannot lose sight of the infrastructure investments needed to build affordable housing. Regardless of your views on Bill 23, we can all agree that without adequate infrastructure financing, the supply of housing will not grow.

And we all know that sacrificing environmental protection to fast-track development is a false economy, with a heavy price to pay in the future.

We need sound planning to build safe, vibrant, sustainable and affordable communities.

It will take collective effort for the Province to build 1.5 million homes by 2031. We need solutions for the entire housing continuum, including those most in need.

And we cannot talk about housing without addressing the growth in homelessness across our province. The pandemic worsened this crisis. It's a challenge that goes beyond planning legislation. It requires approaches that also bring in health care, mental health and a range of social services.

Ontario is prosperous. Our people are highly educated and innovative. It isn't beyond our reach to work together and to find solutions.

AMO will continue to demonstrate leadership in the municipal sector on this file and across a broad range of policy matters that impact local governments.

AMO is also launching two new projects that aim to strengthen municipal governments broadly.

First, AMO's Healthy Democracy Project will focus on building greater respect for democracy and political participation.

If you serve in office, you know the challenges facing democracy – there is more division, and disrespect. There is less thoughtful debate and meaningful participation.

We need to build a sense of community to create civic engagement that goes beyond a scathing tweet.

For the 2022 municipal election, AMO launched the We All Win Campaign, which encouraged greater diversity among municipal candidates.

AMO's Healthy Democracy project will build on this success and lay the groundwork for more respect and diversity in the 2026 election season, and for greater voter turnout.

A healthy local democracy depends on having a strong municipal workforce.

We are also launching AMO's Municipal Workforce Development Project. It will bring together municipal leaders with experts from other sectors to take a closer look at the needs of Ontario's municipal workforce.

Our workforce demographics are changing. This project will foster the community builders of today and tomorrow by working with post-secondary education partners to create new programming.

The project will also help municipal employers develop new approaches to recruit and retain a qualified and committed workforce.

You will be hearing much more about these two major AMO projects in the months and years ahead.

I want to conclude by extending thanks on behalf of the AMO Board for the work you do and for your support of AMO and ROMA.

And in August, I hope you'll join us at the 2023 AMO Conference, to be held in the City of London. I look forward to seeing you there – enjoy the rest of the conference!

Thank you!