

**Remarks by ROMA Chair Robin Jones**  
**2023 ROMA Conference**  
**Monday, January 23, 2023**  
**8:45 - 8:55 a.m.**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Chief Laforme. It is always a pleasure to have you participate and we appreciate that you make the time to be here.

Municipalities are committed to building better relationships with Indigenous peoples. Your commitment to helping us get there together is appreciated.

Good morning!

I can't tell you how much I have looked forward to seeing you all in person. Thank you for joining us.

The turn out for this conference has exceeded our expectations. It's a clear sign of your commitment to your communities. I promise you will go back home with new ideas and energy, as well as a better understanding of what unites us across Ontario.

Our conference theme "breaking new ground" speaks to ROMA's efforts to break new ground on how we can make rural Ontario stronger.

It's not just about innovation – although you will hear a lot about that while you are here.

It is about rethinking rural Ontario's place in the social and economic vitality of the province, today and into the future.

Many of you are newly elected to Council, so let me take a moment to talk about ROMA broadly.

First off, thank you. Thank you for running for office. It is a big commitment. In most cases, you do this as a second job with limited compensation.

We appreciate that you have come long distances and carved out significant time to be here. ROMA is committed to providing you with good value in return.

We are the rural arm of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario – known as AMO. Our board is comprised of the AMO Board's rural caucus – as well as ten zone representatives, who will be elected at this conference to a four-year term. The election will take place between 10 and 2:30 today, so please participate.

This structure is important. Your zone representatives ensure that ROMA's positions reflect the diversity of rural communities from all corners of the province and of various shapes and sizes.

The link to AMO's Board helps ensure that AMO's work reflects the priorities of rural municipalities in every part of Ontario.

ROMA works with AMO to strengthen our collective voice.

The municipal sector is powerful when we find common ground and advocate for shared goals. We are weakest when we speak only for our individual needs.

The last few months have been challenging for the provincial-municipal relationship.

From a municipal perspective, affordable, attainable housing has been in crisis for some time. For a while, it largely impacted those with lower incomes. Now, that the crisis is hitting the middle class, the federal and provincial governments have mobilized.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to our current predicament. Addressing municipal planning and approvals alone will not address the challenge.

To support more housing, we need to expand basic municipal infrastructure and services.

To create a stable housing market, we need tools that will motivate realtors, investors and developers to meet community needs while turning a profit.

To build more affordable and attainable homes, we need to address inflation, the supply chain and labour shortages.

Rural communities can't afford to pay for big infrastructure and service expansions with taxes and fees alone.

Without enough affordable rentals, we cannot recruit workers and address labour challenges.

We need real collaboration among all orders of government, and the housing industry, if we want effective solutions to what is a national, provincial and local crisis.

Housing is a basic need. It's at the core of our health, well-being and economic participation -- and key to creating a thriving community.

At the end of the day, we need to make sure rural Ontario can offer a range of affordable and attainable housing options to meet the needs of all – including newcomers, young families, working people and seniors.

Like COVID, housing is a social and economic crisis that calls for everyone to stop finger pointing and work together.

COVID demonstrated that we *can* all work together. Ontarians expect us to.

Over the last few years, COVID has accelerated change in rural communities.

ROMA has been eager to do its part to find solutions and leverage the *opportunity* that can be found within any crisis.

One year ago, we unveiled a five-point rural action plan. It was built on broad consultation with rural leaders and experts.

Our paper, ***Opportunities for Rural Ontario***, offers strategies around five key themes. These include digital connectivity, housing affordability, access to services, workforce development and, growth on our terms. This paper can be found on ROMA's website.

Digital connectivity will be the foundation of rural Ontario's future. It is essential infrastructure for business, public services and overall quality of life.

In terms of access to services, rural communities need innovative approaches to delivering and funding services. This could be bringing services to people and also includes how we maintain and fund infrastructure and services.

Developing a growing and diverse workforce will be essential to meeting future needs. We need strategies to attract newcomers and keep our youth. COVID broke down geographic barriers – meaning both employees and employers are searching further and wider than ever before.

Rural communities need new ways to manage and leverage opportunities for growth, while maintaining rural quality of life.

During the course of this conference, we'll be giving you updates on each of these key themes.

Housing affordability I've already mentioned. It was our first priority for obvious reasons – including the fact that it's critical to a number of other themes.

ROMA struck a taskforce of experts in planning and municipal finance to go deep and find solutions to rural housing challenges

The taskforce report, which was released at the AMO Conference in August, makes dozens of recommendations to help accelerate new housing and to create incentives to develop housing across the spectrum that our communities need.

Stay tuned for more information on each of these themes throughout the conference.

Municipalities are also on the frontlines of social issues like homelessness and opioid addictions. COVID has worsened what was already a crisis.

Consider this – more than 13,000 Ontarians lost their lives due to COVID-19, from the start of the pandemic in 2020 to June 2022.

During roughly the same period, some 6,000 Ontarians died of opioid-related deaths. Most troubling, the number of deaths from opioids spiked by 36% from 2020 to 2021.<sup>1</sup>

As you are painfully aware, rural and northern communities have not been spared. Delivering harm reduction programs in rural settings can be a challenge, as is the limited access to health care services.

Rural homelessness also looks different.

Rising rents have priced many working people and families out of the market. Couch surfing and living out of cars and campers is a last resort for far too many.

Many rural homeless live rough in ravines and wooded areas. We need to take a different approach to outreach and services for this population. Rural communities also feel the growing

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<sup>1</sup> Sources of COVID/Opioid data:

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/epi/covid-19-daily-epi-summary-report.pdf?la=en>

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/data-and-analysis/substance-use/interactive-opioid-tool>

social and economic impacts of homelessness on our Main Streets. Supportive housing and other options are needed.

These are not just somebody else's problem. These challengers are fraying the fabric of our communities. NIMBYism sows discord and divides people, making it harder to solve persistent issues.

The bottom line is that we can do better – and we must.

Rural life has always held challenges, and rural people have always had resolve.

In municipal government, we know what our communities need to thrive. We know that they are full of promise and untapped potential.

We have innovative ideas and solutions based on first hand experience.

Our conference program is evidence of that. I hope you take advantage of all it has to offer.

In a moment you will hear from Premier Ford.

ROMA looks forward to partnering with the Ontario Government and finding creative solutions that will suit the diversity of communities across our great province.

Moving forward, we hope you keep in touch with ROMA. Learn more about us on our website, [www.roma.on.ca](http://www.roma.on.ca). We are also on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

As well, I urge you to get to know your zone representatives. They'll be listed on the website after the election. ROMA works on your behalf. Your input is invaluable to our efforts to build stronger rural municipal governments.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the conference.