

Note for remarks by

**Kathleen Wynne
Premier of Ontario**

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KEYNOTE REMARKS: ROMA 2017 CONFERENCE

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon.

Thank you, Mayor Holman. It is great to be here at this year's ROMA conference.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge, as I always do, that since long before we began meeting here discussing how we can strengthen our communities, and long before our municipal, provincial or federal governments were formed, this land was a gathering place for many Indigenous peoples. I want to show my respect for how First Nations and Métis people have helped to shape this area, giving special recognition to the Mississaugas of the New Credit.

At this moment in Ontario, in Canada, I believe it is important to remind ourselves that except for those Indigenous people, we all came from somewhere else, most of us, or our ancestors, with not much in our pockets, but with a hope for a better life. Just as people all over the world, people in poverty or distress, look to Ontario and Canada. We remain open to the world.

Beaucoup d'entre vous avez fait un long trajet pour être ici aujourd'hui. Mais peu importe d'où nous venons dans la province, nous sommes tous ici pour la même raison. We are here because we care about the people in our community.

How are they doing? Are seniors receiving the health care they need? Are there good job opportunities for young people? When summer comes, are shovels going into the ground? And will the lakes be clean for swimming? My team and I value this opportunity to exchange ideas with you about how to build this province up for everyone. So thank you for giving us your time.

We are at the start of a big year for Ontario. On July first, our province, along with our country, turns 150 years old. A lot has changed in a century and a half. The calls to unite Canada with a railway are now calls to unite us with high-speed Internet.

The way that we are connected has changed, but what connects us has not. Ontario is made up of communities, the places where we live and work and raise our families. When I was growing up, mine was Richmond Hill, a town of about 16,000 people at that time. It is all of our communities that make Ontario whole.

Alors aujourd'hui, je veux parler de la manière dont nous faisons appel aux énergies de la communauté pour donner de l'essor à notre province.

Much of the time, I find that outdated stereotypes about rural and urban life overshadow this kind of discussion. When a politician really thinks she can say, "you can't borrow a cup of sugar in the city — that's a country thing," and thinks that there is an iota of truth in that statement. It does not help change those stereotypes.

Warmth and neighbourliness are not confined to the country. The same way tech and innovation and diversity are not confined to the city. We all know that. Just look at how across Ontario, in cities and small towns, we have opened our doors to refugees from the Syrian conflict, supporting them as they start their new lives. So I do not have to tell anyone in this room that the challenges people in Ontario face are not where to get cups of sugar.

Whether rural or urban, people struggle with isolation. They struggle to find enough time in the day for their families and their jobs. They struggle to get ahead, and stay ahead, in a changing economy. These are our shared experiences and they defy boundaries. So the bottom line is that we have to face those challenges together. That starts with building up communities and preparing them for the future.

Earlier, I mentioned high-speed Internet. I believe Mayor Allan Thompson is here today. He has been a big proponent of this in Caledon. In an op-ed for the National Post, Mayor Thompson wrote “This is not about binge-watching Netflix.” He is right. It is about students in Caledon being able to finish their homework. It is about their parents having the option to tele-commute. It is about mayors like Allan attracting more investment to the area. That is why we are expanding broadband across Ontario.

One major project that has launched since I last talked to you is SWIFT, or the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology Network. This is a locally-driven initiative and it is going to speed up Internet access for 3.5 million people across southwestern Ontario, including Caledon. That strengthens communities. That builds Ontario up.

The work we are doing together is making a real difference in peoples’ lives. A good example is the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund that we created with you to provide stable, annual funding to build and repair rural infrastructure. In the City of Clarence-Rockland, a double-lane bridge needed to be replaced, the Bearbrook Bridge. We heard from Mayor Guy Desjardins that a new bridge would improve quality of life, make the road safer and help with the flow of heavy goods traffic. After a summer of hard work, that new bridge is open.

Since we last gathered at ROMA, we have announced funding for almost 200 OCIF projects. From upgrading water mains and sewers in Blind River, to improving roadways in Orillia, we are making record-breaking investments in our province’s infrastructure, in your communities’ infrastructure. That strengthens communities. That builds Ontario up. I know as municipal leaders there are many things weighing on your minds. One of the points of these meetings is to give us all a chance to look at progress we are making and what new or recurrent issues need to be addressed.

One that I expect is very top of mind for you is the future of our rural schools. Education is very close to my heart. I took my first steps into political life when my 3 kids were in school. I ran to be a school trustee, because nothing was more important to me than the quality of education in Ontario. Today, Ontario’s public education system is a world leader, but we still have our challenges making the system fair to every family and child. Enrolment is declining in some areas, putting a strain on resources. I know it is a real concern in many of your communities.

The way forward is by working together. Boards need to work much more closely together and in many cases, keep a school open by consolidating. Boards and municipalities also need to work together and find solutions that make sense for your community, and we will work with you. That is exactly why I have a special advisor on Community Hubs, Karen Pitre, who is already working with some of you.

I share your concerns, and I want to ensure that local decision makers are able to secure the best possible education for your kids. It comes down to the important balance we all have to strike as elected officials. It is how to help make the choices that will ensure families across this province can thrive today, while planning ahead for tomorrow.

The work we are doing on climate change is a good example of this. Tackling climate change is the right thing to do, for our kids and grandkids. We just have to be smart about it. That is why we chose an emissions cap program. It is the most affordable way for families and business to transition to a low-carbon economy. So finding that balance is the challenge every day, but it is essential that we do it.

Electricity is another example this and it is something I have spent a lot of time on as Premier because, as I have said, we got that balance wrong. I think it is important that we are honest with each other about how we got here. Let's acknowledge that not so long ago the electricity system was a mess. When there were record-breaking cold snaps or soaring heat waves, people were told to cut their power use. There was not enough electricity to go around. The system was broken. We had no choice but to fix it.

Today, electricity is clean and reliable because of the work we have all done. Businesses do not worry about blackouts. Smog days are a thing of the past, but the cost of strengthening a fragile system has burdened people in every corner of Ontario.

Lately, I have been setting aside time to call people who have written me letters about their electricity bills. I want to hear about what they are going through. I recently spoke with someone from Mayor John Paterson's community. Michael lives in Leamington. Energy is on his mind every day. He works in the greenhouse industry. He is upset by the pressure that electricity prices are putting on him, and his region. Michael has every right to be angry. Something needs to be done. You have told us that, loud and clear, and I agree.

So we have started by lowering electricity bills by eight per cent, eliminating the provincial portion of the HST from bills. For people in many rural communities, immediate savings are more like 20 percent. That makes a difference. Earlier today, we announced how we are expanding access to natural gas. We will offer grants to help build new natural gas infrastructure, which will help consumers and businesses switch from electricity or oil to natural gas.

Creating more energy options for people in rural areas will save them money. It will open up new economic opportunities. It will make a difference for the greenhouse where Michael works, but we still need to do more for people like Michael. So we are going to find more ways to lower rates and reduce the burden on Ontario consumers. We are looking at it all through a lens of fairness. That is the test. Electricity costs money, no one is disputing that, but every month, people in our communities are struggling to cover the total cost on their bills. We must go forward in a way that is fair for them. That is the path we are on, and we will take our next steps before the spring budget.

There has never been a more important time to listen to one another. People are feeling insecure in a changing economy. Even as Ontario's growth is outpacing the rest of the Canada's and our unemployment rate is at a near-decade low. Not everyone is feeling that in their daily lives. Many of the people you represent are not feeling better off. I know that. In times like these, it is easy for politicians to come along and promise to turn back time because there is often a longing for what used to be, but we have to be very wary of those who are long on criticism and nostalgia and short on real solutions.

The past is not an answer, but it does offer us guidance. Lessons about how Ontario has always grown stronger. How it will continue to grow more prosperous and that is by sharing our gains, in the way we have always done, by reinvesting in the people and communities that make Ontario strong.

Inclusive growth is a new term, but it is not a new idea. Universal public health care, the college and university system, the Canada Pension Plan, even our highways and bridges demonstrate how when our province's growth is shared, it creates real, everyday benefits for workers and their families. When people can get ahead, that helps our economy stay ahead too. The Ontario we are building together needs to be one where no one is left behind. That is not just a nice idea. It is a fact.

It is why we are making college and university education more accessible to more people. Starting this fall, we are making average tuition free for some 210,000 students from lower income families, and boosting aid to students from middle-class homes. At Sault College last week, I talked to a student who said, "you know, because of this change that you're making, I won't have to stop my education, go and work for a year, and come back to finish my degree." When young people do finish their degrees, we want there to be great opportunities waiting for them back home. Ontario's economy depends on it.

So the investments we are making together are about building those communities that bring young people back, with programs like OCIF, Connecting Links, Community hubs, Broadband and the Rural Economic Development Program. RED has funded more than 600 projects. It has supported small businesses in Minto, recruited teachers to classrooms in our northern and indigenous communities and helped the City of Kawartha Lakes to create a Water Research Centre, a project that has attracted 15 new businesses to the region.

Today, we renewed RED to begin accepting applications again. RED projects are local. They are tailored to your needs, supporting what you need to help make economic growth more beneficial for everyone in your communities. So we are going to keep making those investments and we are going to rely on your partnership to get them right.

Ontario is made up of communities, and my team and I want to hear from yours. I am travelling every chance I get, and I look forward to continuing this conversation with you in your hometowns.

Jane wants me to tell you that in the last few months, she has lent lemons, eggs and a Mixmaster to neighbours. Our neighbour checks our heat when we are away, just like in small towns and in the countryside all over Ontario. Community happens in Ontario wherever we live.

Thank you all for being here and for the leadership you show in every corner of this province.

Have a great conference!

Thank you.