

**Note for remarks by**

**Kathleen Wynne  
Premier of Ontario**

**JANUARY 22, 2018**

**ROMA Conference**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Thank you, Ron. You, and the whole ROMA team, work so hard to bring us all together every year to make sure that rural Ontario's interests and challenges are heard, and understood, and addressed.

C'est un plaisir d'assister de nouveau à votre conférence et de faire notre part en tant que gouvernement, par l'écoute et par l'action.

Before I go any further, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that we're gathered on the traditional territory of many Indigenous people, dating back countless generations. I want to show my respect for the contributions of First Nations and Metis people, who continue to be essential partners in shaping this place we call home.

One of the great privileges of my job is being able to meet people from every corner of our province. To see what you see every day — that rural Ontario is made up of people who are so resourceful, so innovative, and so proud of their communities.

Take Smiths Falls. It's a town that is constantly reinventing itself. And its accomplishments were recently highlighted by a journalist from Bloomberg, who pointed out how Smiths Falls has always been on the cutting edge.

In the 1960s, the town's RCA Victor plant helped spark Beatlemania in North America. The band's vinyl single "Love Me Do" was pressed there. Then, Smiths Falls became the "Chocolate Capital of Ontario". Hershey employed 750 people, and many more visited to tour the factory and take in the delicious smell.

But of course, what really caught Bloomberg's attention was this: today, Smiths Falls is, quote, "the nation's pot capital." And yes, that's just fine with Mayor Shawn Pankow.

Canopy is now operating out of the old Hershey building, and the local economy is booming. This past fall, five friends from Smiths Falls opened the town's first brewery: Four Degrees Brewing Company. And a European boat company is expanding to Smiths Falls, offering multi-day outings along the Rideau Canal starting next summer.

The transformation in Smiths Falls is remarkable, but it isn't unique. We're living in a period of rapid change, and no matter what part of the province you come from, you're experiencing the magnitude and acceleration of it.

Rural and urban, we are in this together, just as we always have been. We share in each other's triumphs, we benefit from one another's perspectives and we hold the same core values — that

Ontario's greatest strength is our people. And that every one of them, in every community, deserves a fair shot.

It's always been my belief that government exists to create that foundation of fairness. That's why I am so passionate about our children's schools. A strong publicly funded education system is at the foundation of a fairer Ontario.

So in the 1990s, when resources were being taken out of Ontario classrooms, I was concerned. As a mom, I couldn't let the quality of our children's education suffer. So I stood up. I got involved. And I took my first steps in public life at the local level, as a parent activist and then a school board trustee.

This was a time when the relationship between the provincial and local governments was under a lot of strain, and I know Minister Mauro will speak more to that later this afternoon. The reason I am harkening back to that time is I want you to know that — all these years later — I am still driven by those same goals.

I want everyone to have a fair shot and I have only grown more certain that the way to do that is by working together. That's how we've grown as partners; it is how we've learned to listen. And it is why now — even when we disagree — we talk through it, and find solutions.

Last spring, when our government took a stand on behalf of workers and demanded fairness on the job, we sat down with you and had good, engaging discussions. You told us the changes to scheduling wouldn't work for the way you deliver essential services. So we clarified in the legislation that essential services are exempt from some of the new scheduling rules.

You have also been very frank about the need to protect the vital role schools play in your communities, I hear you. Schools matter — and not just to kids. They matter to local businesses, they matter to family commutes, the local housing market — they are at the heart of communities.

So last June, we pressed pause on any new school closures. I'll repeat something I said here last year: The way forward is by working together. School boards need to work much more closely with each other, and boards and municipalities also need to work together to find ways to accommodate students in their community.

To help boards and municipalities successfully resolve situations at the local level, we as a government will provide revised guidelines to support local partners to make these decisions. You told us we need to consider the impact of closures on student programming, student well-being, school board resources and the local community. And that's what we're going to do —

we're going to look beyond the numbers. These new guidelines will make our entire system and your communities stronger. So again, I'd like to thank you for being a strong voice and a strong partner.

The truth is, even though we are one province, with interconnected communities and intertwined economies, the challenges we face aren't one and the same. Look at transportation. In rural Ontario, how you get from place to place is completely different from someone living in a big city. There are different challenges with different needs. But the results need to be the same.

No matter where you live, you need to be able to get around. It's necessary, and it's only fair. So as we've made record-breaking investments in the roads and bridges and transit that connect us all, we've worked with you to make sure that no part of Ontario is left out of this transformation.

Earlier this month, we announced more bus services for people in southwestern Ontario which builds on the increased bus service in the North, serving towns from Hearst to Red Lake.

Right now, it's more important than ever that we keep working together to create the kind of Ontario we all want to live in a place where everyone gets a fair shot at a better life. And you know as well as I — we've always had to fight for this Ontario.

Fairness isn't a given — especially these days, as the nature of work and the economy continue to change. People in our province are struggling. They are anxious about the future. It's something I hear a lot lately.

Recently, a woman named Lise wrote to me. She lives just outside of Ottawa, with her two sons, ages 22 and 25. They didn't expect to be living at home in their 20s, but they can only find precarious work — part-time, minimum wage, no benefits.

I'm sure you know people in the same boat. This isn't what she imagined for them, or what they imagined for themselves. She said, "Times have changed from when I was their age. It's very sad and frightening to say the least." I agree with her — it is scary.

This is a new world with new challenges. What is really striking is that, if you look at the numbers, our economy is doing well — job numbers are up. But that doesn't mean what it used to.

The economy is strong — but that rising tide is not lifting all boats. In these turbulent times, I believe it is even more important that government be that force for fairness — that agent for change.

The truth is, if you want to lead a province at a time like this — you need to be willing to stand up for people. Not just when it's easy or convenient. Every single time.

So we have a plan to create more opportunity and fairness in people's lives. Starting in the fall, we made university and college tuition free for hundreds of thousands of students. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, people woke up in an Ontario where prescription drugs are free for everyone under 25.

And workers woke up in a province where their wages better reflect their hard work. The minimum wage is now \$14 an hour, and will rise to \$15 an hour in 2019. That raise cannot wait. No one who is working full time in Ontario should have to visit a food bank to put meals on the table. That's not the kind of province any of us want to live in.

Over the last few months, I've been out speaking with people at town halls. Last week, we had one in Ottawa. And later this month, there will be one in Thunder Bay. The questions people ask are varied and different, but they share a common theme. What are we doing to confront these mammoth changes in our society? Because change is not coming — it is upon us.

So how can we help people get a better education, better jobs and a better paycheque? How can we deliver better health care and better access to transit? What can we do to build a brighter future for our kids and grandkids?

These are the questions that we have to answer — because in Ontario, we fundamentally believe that it is our responsibility to help one another. We are not perfect, we know that. But we have so much to be proud of and so much potential.

Ontario is a very special place. When I meet with U.S. leaders, they marvel at what we've built here, how we're doing more, not less. How we're talking honestly about what change means, and accepting it on our terms. If there's anywhere that can figure out the best way to confront today's challenges, it is Ontario.

It is us, it is here, it is now.

Thank you. Merci. Meegwetch. And now I'm happy to take your questions.