

ROMA Chair, Mayor Allan Thompson

Sunday, January 19, 2020

2:45 p.m.

2020 ROMA Conference

Sheraton Centre Toronto

Good afternoon.

Thank you, Your Honour, the Honourable Elizabeth Dowdeswell, the Honourable Robert Black and Chief Stacey Laforme, for joining me today.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2020 ROMA Conference and A.G.M.

Each year, this forum grows bigger.

This year there are more than 1,000 participants at the conference.

There will also be hundreds of delegation meetings held with provincial ministries.

It reflects the value in coming together.

Rural communities have always been about neighbours helping one another.

We know that when we help one another and work together, we are all stronger.

At ROMA, we are striving to create a platform where rural neighbours across Ontario can connect.

To discuss shared challenges and learn from one another's experiences.

To have meaningful conversations with the provincial government.

And to have a stronger voice in the future of Ontario.

Of Ontario's 444 municipalities, about 430 are rural or have rural areas inside their borders.

By working together, we can keep rural Ontario moving forward.

And, we can keep Ontario moving forward.

Because rural communities are key to a prosperous Ontario.

ROMA is the voice of these communities.

We make sure that municipal-provincial matters are viewed through a rural lens.

We bring a rural lens to the policy work done by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, or AMO.

When AMO and the Province sit down to talk, ROMA is at the table.

We make sure our voice is heard. That our ambitions are understood.

The Ontario Government is at the mid-point of its mandate.

Work is well underway on many fronts.

We appreciate that many provincial ministers and staff are here with us.

We look forward to hearing from the Premier tomorrow.

The province is an important partner for municipal governments – especially rural ones.

We appreciate that the province has listened and reset its approach to some of our key priorities.

The Government acted swiftly to protect our farmers, livestock and food supply from the unique risks posed by people trespassing on farms.

I want to thank Minister Hardeman and the government for listening to concerns and providing new tools to keep our communities and farms safe.

You will be hearing from Minister Hardeman tomorrow as well.

You will also be hearing from Minister Christine Elliott.

I know there is keen interest in the consultation on modernizing public health and emergency health service.

Municipal governments have been delivering and co-funding these services for many years.

We are active partners in community well-being.

We understand local needs, what works, and we know what needs fixing.

The Minister appointed special advisor Jim Pine to lead the consultation on modernizing these services.

Jim is familiar to many of us as CAO of Hastings County. He is a well-respected and trusted municipal public administrator.

The government consultation is now underway.

We appreciate the focus on this file.

Many of you have sat down with Jim and Ministry officials already. Others are working on submissions.

The ROMA Board will be sitting down with Jim and the Ministry to share the rural lens on these services during this conference.

It is important that they consider the unique circumstances of rural communities.

One size does not fit all.

Our residents are spread across large areas. Our communities are aging faster. At the same time, our property tax base is limited.

ROMA is focused on maintaining these important services while protecting the property taxpayers from additional costs.

We appreciate that Minister Elliott and Jim Pine are also taking part in our concurrent session on rural health care tomorrow.

I want to thank the government for protecting the formula-based Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund.

It will be a great vehicle for additional provincial investment once the province's finances are back in order.

Roads and bridges make up a significant portion of rural budgets. They are our life blood – key to quality of life and economic growth.

I also want to thank the province for safeguarding OMPF investment for 2020. That funding is absolutely essential for the sustainability of many rural and northern communities.

The Federal Government has also made important investments in rural Ontario. In 2019, we welcomed the one-time doubling of the federal Gas Tax Fund, which is administered by AMO directly to municipal governments.

Permanent and predictable infrastructure funding is a top ROMA priority.

Infrastructure also means broadband infrastructure.

Connectivity lets us compete economically and build thriving communities. It is key to moving rural Ontario forward.

Broadband is essential to our quality of life and our future depends it

Connectivity should not be the problem for rural communities. **It should be the solution.**

It can be the solution to help us overcome the challenges of great distances and small populations.

There has been good progress in dedicated investment in broadband and cellular networks, both with the federal rural broadband strategy and \$315 million in provincial funding.

Finding innovative ways to improve services in rural and northern areas is a top priority.

All providers need to work together to connect communities that are hard to serve. **There is no other way.**

You may remember that last year at this conference, the Premier announced that his government would revisit joint and several liability.

Submissions were due earlier this fall.

I appreciate that it will take time for the government to review the feedback.

While there is no easy fix, there are other Canadian models.

Nearly all other provinces have some kind of reasonable limit to municipal liability. – while still making sure that those who are injured are compensated fairly, by the right parties.

We are looking for relief from skyrocketing insurance premiums and the liability chill that happens all too often.

Small communities do not have the growing tax base to meet these costs.

Reforms wouldn't cost the province a dime - but would free up taxpayer dollars for the critical services we provide.

Small towns would also benefit from less red tape.

We were happy when the government said it wanted to cut red tape, because we face plenty.

We have small staff resources. They need to be focused on serving our residents – not filing reports and forms to the province. Especially when nobody reads them.

Often there is little purpose. It can be a waste of both time and money.

Another ROMA priority is climate change.

Many of our communities are impacted by high-water levels.

Municipal governments are on the front lines of extreme weather caused by the climate crisis.

All three orders of government must work in partnership to address the challenges.

Municipal government needs long-term, reliable funding for capital projects that will protect the environment.

That includes water, wastewater, and stormwater work. It also includes [shoreline protection], dam maintenance, waste management and transit.

We want to work together on flood preparedness and mitigation.

I want to also acknowledge the government's Open for Business measures.

I believe that rural communities are starting to see the results of those efforts.

We look forward to hearing from the Premier, Ministers and others on these important matters both here at the conference and in the year ahead.

I want to thank the government – and all of you as well – for participating in this forum.

Not only does it give ROMA a stronger voice at the table, it also allows us to further direct support to rural communities.

We continue to support the Teeny Tiny Summits, which allow small communities to gather regionally, share ideas and learn from one another.

During the past year ROMA has also been pleased to support our northern colleagues in the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association and the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities. Supporting our peer associations makes all of us stronger.

As ROMA Chair I had the privilege to attend both the NOMA and FONOM conferences, as well as the OSUM conference and the International Plowing Match.

By visiting different regions of our province, ROMA can better understand their diverse needs and priorities.

It allows us all to look for common ground and to find ways to work together to move all of our communities forward.

The ROMA board has also had fruitful discussion with the Ontario Good Roads Association, and we look forward to collaborating with them on shared priorities.

Through our MOU with the Rural Ontario Institute, ROMA is supporting research into rural Ontario to drive better solutions and innovation.

I am very pleased the **Norm Ra-get-lie**, executive director of ROI will be joining us shortly to talk about their recent research work.

The topics are rooted in priorities that they heard from rural stakeholders, like workforce shortages, working with indigenous communities and serving an aging population.

The best way to keep moving rural Ontario forward is to work in partnership with others.

The ROMA Board is made up of at-large members, many of whom serve on the AMO Board's rural caucus, as well as Zone Representatives from across the province.

The integration with AMO allows us a **stronger voice**, greater access to the province and policy expertise.

I am very proud that this year, the ROMA Board decided to create a new Zone 10 for northwestern Ontario.

The Board heard clearly that this was a priority and we listened.

This will strengthen the number and diversity of northern voices on our board.

The Board was pleased to welcome Kevin Holland, Mayor of the Township of Conmee, who was acclaimed as the Zone 10 representative when nominations closed on December 20.

As Mayor Holland joins me on stage, I'd like to welcome the rest of the ROMA Board members to the stage as well:

- Mayor Chris White of the Township of Guelph-Eramosa who is our First Vice Chair and Zone 2 representative
- Councillor Eli El-Chantiry of the City of Ottawa, Second Vice Chair and Zone 8 representative
- Councillor Dennis Crevits of the Municipality of Central Elgin and Zone 1 representative
- Councillor Lloyd Ferguson of the City of Hamilton, Zone 3 representative
- Councillor Pam Sayne of the Township of Minden Hills, Zone 5 representative
- Mayor Kim Love of the Township of Madawaska Valley and Zone 6 representative
- Councillor Cameron Wales of the City of Brockville, Zone 7 representative
- Councillor Bill Vrebosch, of the City of North Bay, Zone 9 and AMO Rural Caucus Representative

Our other AMO Rural Caucus representatives include:

- Reeve Peter Emon of the Town of Renfrew
- Mayor Robin Jones of the Village of Westport
- Mayor Jane O'Neill of Municipality of Marmora and Lake
- Chris Wray, CAO/Clerk of the Township of Johnson

It takes time and commitment to serve on a board like ROMA, but it is valuable and rewarding as well. .

I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues for their hard work on behalf of rural municipalities across Ontario. – Thank you.

On behalf of the ROMA Board - **thank you all for coming.**

We worked hard to create a program that would speak to your priorities.

We wanted to focus on the issues that matter to you and on finding solutions so we can move forward into a prosperous future.

In the days ahead, you will hear from provincial leaders, colleagues and experts.

There really is something for everyone.

I encourage you to listen, learn and share.

I hope you leave inspired.

After you leave, you can keep up with ROMA through a new quarterly newsletter.

Please keep an eye out for it.

You can also follow and engage with us on social media.

In closing, let me say it's an honour to serve on the ROMA Board and I thank you for your support.

I'd now like to welcome Afshin Majidi, Executive Treasurer of ROMA.