

March 27, 2026

Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus Responds to the 2026 Ontario Budget

With the release of the [2026 Ontario Budget, *A Plan to Protect Ontario*](#), the [Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus](#) (EOWC) acknowledges the government's efforts to provide stability during global economic uncertainty. We appreciate investments that support regional priorities for rural and small-urban communities, residents and businesses, but know that there is more work to do together with strong collaboration across all orders of government. We further encourage continued and expanded investments in critical infrastructure, building on the commitments outlined in the 2026 Ontario Spring Budget to support long-term growth and connectivity in rural

"The Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus thanks Premier Doug Ford, Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy, and Minister Rob Flack for their leadership in delivering a 2026 Budget that supports affordability and invests in rural economic resilience. Measures such as the one-year Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) removal, the historic small business corporate income tax reduction, new investments in health, social services, supportive housing, and enhancements to the Ontario Transit Investment Fund will provide meaningful relief and growth opportunities for residents and businesses across eastern Ontario. This Budget reflects a clear understanding of the challenges and priorities facing rural and small-urban communities." - **Bonnie Clark, EOWC Chair**

In [the EOWC's pre-budget submission to the Ministry of Finance](#), we outlined seven priorities (below). We are encouraged to see federal and provincial collaboration to ensure municipalities are made whole in funding the housing-enabling infrastructure needed to support growth. The EOWC remains *ready to work, and ready to grow* to deliver results for our region.

Recommendation 1: A Strong Fiscal Framework for Local Governments

- The EOWC continues to join the [Association of Municipalities of Ontario \(AMO\)](#) to call for a modernized financial framework. The budget acknowledges the need for federal-provincial-municipal partnership, particularly on housing affordability and development charges. However, we continue to call on the government to introduce new financial framework changes to strengthen the municipal-provincial fiscal relationship.

Recommendation 2: Tailored Support for Rural and Small-Urban Municipalities

- The EOWC called for support to advance shared priorities around housing, infrastructure, and growth-related projects. The 2026 Budget responds with enhanced investments, including a doubling of the Ontario Transit Investment Fund to \$30 million over three years to support rural transit. Additionally, the Province provides direct tax relief to small businesses, which will support our communities' local economies.
- Overall, the Province continues to deliver a range of programs that support rural and small-urban municipalities. The EOWC will continue engaging with provincial leaders to demonstrate how sustained investment in communities is critical to Ontario's economic strength and Canada's overall success.

Recommendation 3: Investment in Trade-Enabling Ports

- The EOWC called for investment in trade and transport-enabling ports across eastern Ontario to strengthen the "Highway H₂O" corridor. The budget references investment in trade corridors and related infrastructure, including \$31 billion for roads and highways to connect goods to markets. Eastern Ontario remains a vital gateway for interprovincial and international trade. We see an opportunity to explore strategic investments in port and transportation infrastructure across our region to benefit the province's trade diversification agenda to 'Protect Ontario' now and in the future.

Recommendation 4: Establish a Regulated Paramedic College

- The EOWC called for the establishment of a regulated paramedic college to accelerate training, standardize professional practice, and enable an expanded scope of care. The budget includes investments in healthcare, including the \$1.1 billion in additional hospital funding, and expansions to the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant. The EOWC believes there is value in exploring models that strengthen rural and small-urban healthcare delivery and bring Ontario in line with other provinces paramedic successes; therefore, we continue to encourage investments related to a regulated paramedic college.

Recommendation 5: Affordable and Sustainable OPP Services

- The EOWC called for a collaborative approach to ensure OPP services remain affordable, transparent, and sustainable for municipalities and residents over the long-term. The budget includes public safety investments, with an additional investment of \$8.3 million for the Bail Compliance and Warrant Apprehension Grant Program in 2026-2027, but no specific measures address the cost pressures faced by municipalities that contract OPP services. We appreciate the government's investments in public safety, however, the sustainability of OPP costs for our municipalities remains a concern.

Recommendation 6: Include Rural Communities in the Building Faster Fund

- On housing affordability overall, the EOWC is pleased to see the one-year expansion of HST relief for home buyers on new homes as an immediate action to support affordability for home buyers and support regional economic growth.
- The EOWC called for the inclusion of more rural and small-urban communities in the Building Faster Fund. The budget references the Building Faster Fund but does not explicitly include expansion for more rural communities. The EOWC appreciates the Ontario government's ongoing investments in housing-enabling infrastructure. However, there is value in exploring how the Building Faster Fund, or a similar program, could be extended to a broader range of rural and small-urban municipalities.

Recommendation 7: Address Homelessness, Addictions, and Mental Health

- The EOWC called for collaborative work with municipalities to address homelessness caused by addictions and mental health. The budget delivered \$53 million over three years to expand supportive housing initiatives, enabling over 425 new units. The EOWC is encouraged by these investments as well as the government's continued investment commitments into HART Hubs.

The [Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus](#) is a non-profit organization representing 103 small urban and rural municipalities across eastern Ontario. Spanning 50,000 square kilometres and serving over 1.1 million residents, the EOWC has been a united regional voice for more than 20 years. It advocates for municipal priorities and collaborates with all orders of government, businesses, non-profits, Indigenous leaders, the media, and the public to drive positive change for eastern Ontario.

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