

**Interim ROMA Chair Mayor Allan Thompson Remarks  
2019 ROMA Conference  
Sunday, Jan. 27, 2:55 p.m.  
Sheraton Centre Toronto, Grand Ballroom Centre/West**

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***Check against delivery.***

Good afternoon. Thank you Chief Laforme.

It is my pleasure, as ROMA's interim Chair, to welcome you to ROMA's third annual conference.

This year is our biggest yet.

We have more than 1,000 participants with us.

There will be some 400 delegation meetings over the next couple of days.

Rural leaders see the value in coming together:

To learn from each other.

To connect with the Province.

To find solutions to our shared challenges.

Because, as our conference theme says, "Rural Matters."

Rural communities matter to Ontario.

Our province cannot be strong without us.

More than two-thirds of Ontario municipalities have less than 10,000 residents.

Scores more have areas that are rural in nature.

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

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

When AMO and the Province sit down to talk – that rural perspective is there.

In fact, it is interesting to see where the rural and urban perspectives intersect.

One is not better than the other. Both are important.

And we make sure our voice is heard. That our ambitions are understood.  
Rural Ontario aspires to be dynamic and competitive.

We are not trying to become urban.

Our rural character matters to us, to our residents, and frankly, it benefits all Ontarians.

We like our wide-open spaces, our fertile fields, our landscape and heritage communities that add to the fabric of this province.

We are looking to secure and build a prosperous future for these places.

This is an important time in Ontario. The first new government in 15 years was elected on a platform of change.

The course they are setting will have a profound impact on how we move forward.

This conference gives us the chance to talk about changes they could do to help make us stronger.

And, things they should not do that would make us weaker.

This forum is important because despite our own differences, rural communities face many common challenges.

First and foremost, trying to create thriving communities with limited dollars.

We are well into planning our local budgets.

It is always a challenge to meet all our needs.

We are awaiting word on 2019 Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund grants.

For many, completing budgets is challenging without this information.

Making an educated guess might be misleading.

What is certain, is that this fund is important to helping small, rural and northern communities make ends meet.

It helps to address regional economic imbalances. And every dollar counts.

Every dollar we lose will either have to be replaced by property taxes, saved through cuts to services or by using capital dollars to fund operating costs.

We are impressing upon the Province the importance of the OMPF to rural and northern municipalities.

Rural municipalities know how to be creative, and that innovation is helpful for tight budgets.

A lot of innovation and imagination will be featured here at the conference.

For example: Deseronto Transit dealt with its transportation challenges by designing bus routes around local employers, shifts schedules, education and services.

And they partnered with their neighbours, unlocking additional funding through the Provincial Gas Tax.

Bruce County found ways to reduce the burden on new businesses by offering “one-window” resources and services at all library locations.

And they are working through lean principles to improve land use planning services, providing better value to clients and reducing waste.

In Nippissing, they are tackling unemployment and poverty through an online portal that matches people on assistance with employers.

Rural municipal governments are resourceful. They have to be. There isn't a lot of fat to cut from our budgets.

We must ensure our government services are affordable for our taxpayers.

The province can help by taking on the hidden costs that hit our bottom line.

To their credit, there has been progress on some long-standing policy files.

We finally have provincial legislation to protect double-hatter firefighters.

This one hits close to home for me.

There were 5 volunteer Caledon firefighters who agreed to stand up against the union.

The union charged and fined them for being professional firefighters who also volunteered in their home community.

I want to thank those firefighters for their courage. It took a great toll on them.

I am very proud of Caledon.

AMO has been working on this file for years and I am proud that ROMA helped amplify the message.

Every rural government can breathe a sigh of relief.

The change helps secure fire protection in communities that could never afford a full-time fire brigade.

Are there other opportunities?

With the repeal of the Police Services Act, we can take meaningful action to modernize policing and address rising costs.

We can all benefit from less red tape.

Let's remain hopeful that a review of the red-tape faced by municipal governments reduces the reporting and forms that are swamping our staff.

If the form or report is not used or even read by the province, then why is it needed?

Again, across all types of municipal governments, we also need fair and reasonable limits on municipal liability.

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

The province can also help unleash the potential of rural communities.

Rural areas must be open for business - our communities have a lot to offer.

Affordable places to live, skilled workers and, road and rail links to key markets.

What do we need? To build and maintain quality infrastructure.

We need road networks and amenities that help us move people, products and services.

ROMA is calling on the province to seriously look at further dedicated funding for our rural roads, bridges and other traditional infrastructure – for the long-term.

And, because it is 2019, we need broadband and cellphone networks too.

Connectivity is absolutely key to the success of our rural communities.

It has been two years since the CRTC said broadband is a basic telecommunications service for all Canadians.

We need a path to get there, because market forces alone are not going to connect rural places.

A business on a rural route needs to connect to markets and customers around the world – and connect reliably.

The internet of things will transform our lives. It will touch every industry, from auto to agriculture and beyond.

Rural places cannot be left behind.

Here again, we have taken the initiative.

SWIFT in the southwest and EORN in the east, have developed regional solutions.

Municipal governments have come to the table.

We need both the federal and provincial governments to step up.

We also need access to natural gas and electricity

Affordable energy commodities will help strengthen our communities, so rural businesses and families can succeed.

Finally, the most important thing we ask of the province is to remember to view its plans through a rural lens.

Consider things like rural geography, weather and challenges to delivering services.

Consider our fiscal realities. Our relatively smaller workforce and what that means for capacity.

We know we will continue to be innovative and creative.

This conference is a testament to that.

ROMA has worked hard to provide an informative program.

Over the next two days you will hear about the full range of rural matters.

You'll hear about unique solutions and ideas that I hope inspire you.

I want to thank you all for coming.

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 us on Twitter @ROMA underscore O-n-t.

It is an honour to serve on the ROMA Board, so thank you for your support.

Last year, we had a number of meaningful accomplishments.

At this time, I'd like to invite Former ROMA Chair, Ron Holman, to report on the achievements of the past year.

Ron served as ROMA chair for the past four years. Ron chose not to run for re-election as Mayor of Rideau Lakes this time around.

I believe we owe Ron an enormous debt of gratitude for his leadership, his representation of rural Ontario and his many accomplishments as ROMA Chair.

Ron, thank you for joining us.