

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL ONTARIO

In a Post-COVID World: A Plan for Action

Rural Ontario has been changing for some time and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated that change. That is why the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) commissioned an action plan to foster rural resilience and rethink the role of rural communities in the economic and social vitality of the province – today and in the future.

[*Opportunities for Rural Ontario in a Post-COVID World*](#) delves into the factors that define and shape rural Ontario. It is based on consultation with rural stakeholders and leaders, as well as data analysis in partnership with the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI). It was authored by Kathy Woods, CEO of Pivotal Momentum Inc. **Opportunities for Rural Ontario is an action plan for rural leaders by rural leaders.**

ROMA's action plan focuses on recognizing rural Ontario as a vibrant network of communities essential to the social and economic fabric of Ontario. The plan calls for policy approaches that acknowledge Ontario is comprised of interconnected communities. Using a "rethink rural Ontario" approach for policy decisions will help realize rural Ontario's untapped potential to enrich and strengthen the entire province.

Key Themes for a Vibrant Future

ROMA sees opportunities for growth in rural Ontario's resource-based sectors, its tourism products and experiences, diversified workforce, and education and training capabilities. These strengths, and the affordable, welcoming nature of its communities, are integral to our prosperity and that of the entire province.

Opportunities for Rural Ontario digs into how five key themes shape rural Ontario and recommends approaches and strategies for immediate and longer-term actions. ROMA calls for strategies that recognize the themes are inter-dependent. The themes include:



Digital connectivity:

Connectivity and the greater use of digital technology is the foundation of rural Ontario's future. It is essential infrastructure for business, public services and overall quality of life.



Housing affordability:

Rural areas need creative approaches to build the full spectrum of housing options that are affordable and attainable for all – including newcomers, young families, working people and seniors.



Access to services:

Rural communities need innovative approaches to delivering and funding services, including bringing services to people rather than people going to services. This also includes rethinking how we maintain and fund transportation infrastructure, as well as services like long-term care and paramedicine.



Workforce development:

Rural communities need a strong, growing and diverse labour force to meet the needs of the business community and public sector. This includes attracting newcomers, retaining youth, addressing staffing shortages and ensuring a skilled workforce for the future. Work-from-home has also disconnected labour from location, meaning the scope of search for both employees



Growth on our own terms:

Rural communities need new approaches to leverage opportunities for growth, while retaining rural character. Growth opportunities include an increased focus on in-province supply chains and the movement of urban dwellers to rural areas. These must be managed effectively.

Recommendations

In all, the plan identifies 23 recommendations as a roadmap for rural Ontario to reach its potential. ROMA will engage with municipalities, the Province and key stakeholders to implement the plan.

- 1** Develop a new approach to analyze Ontario's economic strength and efficiency
- 2** Increase Ontario's economic resiliency by identifying potential new goods that could be produced in-province
- 3** Build digital connectivity now
- 4** Encourage business adoption of digital technologies
- 5** Improve infrastructure funding process
- 6** Clarify standards for asset management planning
- 7** Plan transportation that enhances tourism
- 8** Plan for the future of electric and Connected Autonomous Vehicles
- 9** Consider demographics in policy development
- 10** Develop more in-province supply chains
- 11** Make community well-being a foundation of policy
- 12 & 13** Embrace new perspectives on labour market attraction and retention
- 14** Attract people to rural Ontario
- 15 16 & 17** Develop housing policy that reflects rural reality
- 18** Develop planning policy that facilitates local decision-making
- 19** Create innovative pathways to economic development and growth
- 20 & 21** Create collaborative networks to deliver services locally
- 22** Coordinate for success of much-needed changes in Long-Term Care
- 23** Overhaul funding approach for Long-Term Care