

Ministry of Rural Affairs

# Rural Roadmap: The Path Forward for Ontario

April 2014



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# Letter from the Premier



The Honourable Kathleen Wynne,  
Premier of Ontario

Ontario is defined by the strengths of its diverse communities.

Whether you live in a city, town, hamlet or a rural concession, we all have a shared interest in building our province's future prosperity.

As Premier and Minister of Agriculture and Food, I firmly believe that a strong rural Ontario is essential to that economic success.

Rural Ontario is home to an advanced manufacturing sector and a growing and increasingly diversified retail sector. It is also home to Ontario's agri-food sector, which currently generates \$34 billion in gross domestic product and sustains 740,000 jobs – that is about one in every nine jobs across the province.

I believe more can be done to create an even more robust rural economy.

That is why I issued a challenge last fall to double our agri-food sector's annual growth rate, and to create 120,000 new jobs by 2020. The Ontario government will support the sector to meet this challenge.

That is why my government is pursuing a six-point economic plan that will drive economic growth across Ontario.

Investing in advanced skills, training and education and improving infrastructure are key pillars of this plan.

Government is doing its part to grow a stronger rural economy. Working together with our rural partners, we need to form a unified front to ensure rural issues remain at the forefront.

That's why we created the Ministry of Rural Affairs in February 2013.

As head of this portfolio, Minister Jeff Leal has travelled across the province to meet with rural stakeholders and gather feedback. Together, we are making sure the voice of rural Ontario is heard at the Cabinet table.

In addition, last month, the ministry and the Rural Ontario Institute organized the Rural Ontario Summit in Cobourg. This inaugural event brought together rural leaders from many fields to discuss health care, education, economic development and other issues of importance to rural Ontario.

I want to thank Minister Leal both for his passion and tireless commitment to improve the lives of rural Ontarians. And through this report, Minister Leal and his ministry have launched a long overdue discussion that will create stronger, healthier rural communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathleen Wynne". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kathleen Wynne,  
Premier of Ontario

# Letter from the Minister

Rural Ontario, to me, embodies opportunity.

It is made up of hundreds of small communities with residents and businesses working collaboratively. These partnerships build the foundation for a strong, local economy. Overall, the strength of our provincial economy depends on the continued success of our small and rural communities.

Working together, we have made a lot of progress over the past decade. Since 2003, rural Ontario has benefited from the hundreds of schools and hospitals that have been built or renovated. In addition, 68 Family Health Teams are providing high-quality care to over 458,823 rural Ontarians. In terms of infrastructure, we have built or rebuilt more than 7,900 kilometres of roads, constructed over 950 new bridges and provided millions of rural Ontarians with high-speed internet access. But there is still work to be done.

Today, rural Ontario is competing in a modern, globalized economy. Never before have we had the opportunity to reach so many new markets. But with that opportunity come challenges.

For this reason, your provincial government has adopted a realistic, pragmatic approach to support rural communities. This includes promoting economic growth and creating jobs; modernizing roads, bridges and other critical infrastructure; providing access to high-quality health care; and improving education and training opportunities.

In March 2014, we held the first-ever Rural Ontario Summit in partnership with the Rural Ontario Institute. This was an important chance to discuss the challenges and opportunities rural Ontario faces and help guide the road ahead. This summit was the culmination of a year of work engaging with rural residents, gaining a better understanding of the challenges they face and learning from the successful initiatives and strategies developed in rural communities across Ontario.

This report outlines a number of priorities for the next year. These priorities will serve as building blocks for the provincial government's long-term rural planning. Static reports sit on shelves and collect dust. Your government understands that good public policy must be collaborative and focus on your ideas, needs, challenges and opportunities. Rural planning must be dynamic. This will enable the government to implement strategies for Ontarians living and working in rural communities.

We all have a role to play in strengthening rural communities. This includes your provincial government's commitment to continue working on behalf of Ontario's rural residents, businesses and municipalities to ensure they have the tools they need to succeed in today's economy.

Sincerely,



Jeff Leal,  
Minister of Rural Affairs



The Honourable Jeff Leal,  
Minister of Rural Affairs

# Introduction

The Ontario government established the Ministry of Rural Affairs (MRA) in February 2013 to ensure the voice of rural Ontario is heard, its strengths are leveraged and its unique needs are addressed.

MRA works to promote growth and opportunities for rural Ontario and support a high quality of life for its residents. In addition to launching our own initiatives, we also evaluate policies and programs proposed by other ministries to ensure rural Ontario is taken into account. Our goal is to create strong, healthy rural communities that support good jobs, attract investment and contribute to Ontario's economic success.

Rural Ontario is varied and diverse, encompassing farmland and forests, hamlets and booming towns. Some rural communities are close to cities, some are remote. Some rely on tourism, others on manufacturing and still others on natural resources. That's why meeting our goals can only be achieved through continued consultation and collaboration.

Over the past year, we listened to communities and regions from Essex to the Quebec border and in Ontario's North. We talked to farmers, mayors, Aboriginal leaders, small business owners, corporate CEOs and other residents and stakeholders. We also convened the province's first-ever Rural Summit. Based on what we heard, we have identified four key priorities:

- investing in people
- investing in infrastructure
- investing in business and regions
- continuing the conversation

This report summarizes what rural Ontarians have told us. It describes how we've responded, outlining the actions MRA and other provincial ministries have already taken to ensure rural communities receive the services, programs and opportunities they need to prosper. Finally, it sets out our priorities for next year and lays the foundation for a dynamic rural plan — a plan MRA will develop in collaboration with our stakeholders and other ministries to help ensure a healthy, innovative and prosperous future.





# Investing in People

*Ontario is defined by the strength of its people. That's why the provincial government is investing in health care programs that will help Ontarians stay healthy and productive. It's why the government is investing in education and training, giving Ontarians the tools and opportunities they need to forge successful careers wherever they live. And it's why we're helping rural communities create a welcoming environment for immigrants, with all the diversity, skills and experience they bring.*

## What we've heard

### Rural health care

Ontario has made great strides in patient-focused health care, increasing access to services in rural Ontario and investing in measures not just to address illness but also to promote health.

We know that health care consumes over \$48 billion dollars — roughly 42 per cent of Ontario's total program expenditures. While the top five per cent of patients use about two-thirds of our health care dollars, the healthiest 50 per cent of us use only one per cent. So rather than addressing our fiscal challenges the traditional way — by looking line by line at what we spend on hospitals, on medication, on long-term care — we need to shift our focus to better serve the patient's needs.

Patients and health care professionals alike told us they want better-integrated services and stronger collaboration between Local Health Integration Networks, government, communities and other key partners. They want increased

support for telemedicine, so that rural Ontarians can access the care they need without the burden of long commutes.

We've heard from health care administrators that the costs of delivering health care in rural Ontario are higher than average and are increasing. Finally, stakeholders told us that while hospitals and other health care facilities are a crucial part of the health equation, it's also important to prevent disease and promote healthy lifestyles.

### Aging

As rural Ontarians grow older, serving our seniors becomes ever more important. Across the province, we consistently heard a call for transportation options that allow seniors to live independently, access the services and programs they need and continue to play an active role in their community. And when seniors can no longer live independently, they want more supportive housing and community health care options close to home.

*With an investment from the Small, Rural and Northern Hospital Transformation Fund, Nipigon District Hospital implemented standardized admissions procedures through new online software.*

*Bluewater Health in Sarnia and Petrolia has reduced wait times in a big way. Since 2005, wait times are down 71 per cent for hip replacement, 84 per cent for MRIs, 91 per cent for CT scans and 91 per cent for cataract surgery.*

### Skills training and youth

It's a familiar story in many rural communities: youth must often make choices that involve moving away to pursue education and careers. At the same time, a number of companies in rural areas tell us they can't find the skilled workforce they need to grow. Everyone agrees that one of the answers is more apprenticeships, mentorship opportunities, internships and co-op placements that allow young people to enhance their skills and gain essential work experience.

Another common concern is the two-fold challenge facing many rural schools: their budgets are shrinking due to declining enrollment, yet they pay higher costs for materials and resources compared to their urban counterparts. We've heard demand for a greater focus on job search skills and career planning in the high school curriculum. Finally, we've heard that young people are increasingly looking for activities and spaces that support their positive development.

## Attracting and integrating newcomers

Demographic trends are clear. For rural communities to grow and attract a skilled workforce, immigration is essential. Yet in 2012, just 1.3 per cent of immigrants to Ontario chose to live outside metropolitan centres.

We've heard from many sources that employers and communities are key in attracting, training and integrating newcomers. While Ontario has made significant progress in recognizing the credentials and experience that immigrants bring, both immigrants and employers agree that soft skills — such as networking, communication skills and understanding Canadian business culture — play a significant role in workplace success.

# What we're doing

## Improving access to rural health care

Wherever they live, Ontarians deserve high-quality health care. Thanks to various provincial initiatives, rural Ontarians now have access to better health care closer to home. According to the Health Care Experience Survey, based on data collected between October 2012 and September 2013, 95 per cent of rural residents have access to a family doctor. In fact, since 2008, the rate of new doctor recruitment outpaced rural population growth.

Sixty-eight **Family Health Teams** have been set up to serve rural communities with populations under 10,000. These teams of family doctors, registered nurses and other health care professionals provide ongoing services with a focus on chronic disease management, disease prevention and health promotion. What's more, seven of the 25 clinics led by nurse practitioners in Ontario have been opened in rural areas.

The **Underserved Area Program** helps communities recruit and retain health professionals in the province's rural and remote areas. Among other things, the program has staffed 21 nursing stations in rural and northern communities with a full-time nurse and/or nurse practitioner. The **Northern and Rural Recruitment and Retention Initiative** (NRRRI) provides further support, offering taxable financial incentives to each

## Supporting Aboriginal people in rural Ontario

Across the province, innovative initiatives are coming out of Aboriginal communities, from ecological restoration to local economic development. To build on those successes and help create prosperous, healthy communities, Aboriginal leaders are calling for greater collaboration and new partnerships.

We've also heard about the importance of investing in Aboriginal youth. With population growth that currently outpaces the rest of Canada, Aboriginal people will make up an increasing percentage of tomorrow's workforce. As a result, fostering leadership among Aboriginal youth and investing in skills training are crucial to Ontario's social and economic future.

eligible physician who establishes a full-time practice in an eligible community. There have been 385 NRRRI grants approved since the program was announced on April 1, 2010. In the 2013/14 fiscal year, 98 NRRRI grants have been approved.

Meanwhile, the **Rural Family Medicine Locum Program** maintains ongoing primary medical care in eligible Ontario communities by providing temporary, short-term replacement coverage for practicing rural family physicians.

To better coordinate the care that patients receive, our government established 54 **Community Health Links** across Ontario, including many that serve rural and northern areas. Community Health Links bring together the entire team of care providers to develop individualized care plans for each patient.

In addition, the 14 **Community Care Access Centres** operating across Ontario help people to live independently at home, access support services and find appropriate care facilities.

To help serve our widely dispersed population, the Province established **Ontario's Telemedicine Network** in 2003. Since then, it has saved rural residents 237 million kilometres of travel. In 2012/13, more than 300,000 patients received care through the Network — a 51 per cent increase over the previous year.

And for patients with chronic health conditions, the **Telehomecare Expansion Project** helps them manage their health with the aid of remote monitoring technology and the support of specially trained nurses.

These initiatives are part of our comprehensive **Action Plan for Health Care**. We will continue to make important investments to ensure that rural residents get access to the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

## Addressing aging

Ontario is aging, and we're getting ready. Ontario's **Action Plan for Seniors**, launched in January 2013, is creating the kind of province where seniors can remain healthy and active and continue to lead independent, productive lives. The plan identifies three overarching goals: healthy seniors, senior-friendly communities and safety and security.

*Thanks to Ontario's \$20-million investment in small and rural hospitals, facilities like the South Bruce Grey Health Centre are undertaking initiatives such as improving patient care and safety by standardizing clinical procedures for treating delirium, depression and dementia in older adults.*

*Mobility challenges can be a serious obstacle for seniors, especially in rural areas. Thanks to an Ontario Trillium grant to purchase a new vehicle, Iroquois Falls Access Transit can ensure seniors in their community get the transportation services they need.*

As part of the Action Plan for Seniors, the government also released **Finding the Right Fit: Age-friendly Community Planning** in August 2013. This guide helps municipalities develop physical and social environments and local

aging plans that support independent and active living, allowing seniors to stay connected to their communities. Among the key issues it covers are public buildings, transportation, housing and community support.



In addition, a new **Seniors Community Grant Program** was introduced in November 2013. The program will help seniors participate in more community activities, continue their learning in areas like technology and financial literacy and develop a strong sense of social inclusion and community participation. This program complements provincial support for **Elderly Persons Centres**, which provide a range of social and recreational programs and seniors' information fairs.

More than half of Ontario residents currently have access to **Community Paramedicine** in their communities. This innovative program partners paramedics with teams of health professionals to coordinate care for patients with complex, chronic conditions. By allowing paramedics to apply their training and skills beyond emergency response, these programs help seniors and other patients to live independently, while reducing unnecessary emergency room visits and hospital admissions.

To help seniors stay in their homes longer, the government created the **Healthy Homes Renovation Tax Credit** in 2012. Worth up to \$1,500 each year, the personal income tax credit makes it more affordable to complete renovations and installations, from walk-in bathtubs and stair lifts to lower kitchen counters. At the same time, it helps reduce pressures on more costly hospital and long-term care services.

Since 2004, the **Francophone Seniors' Information Fairs** project has been jointly funded by the federal and Ontario governments and delivered through a partnership between the Ontario Seniors' Secretariat and la Fédération des aînés et des retraités francophones de l'Ontario. These fairs primarily target rural, isolated and northern communities in Ontario. In 2012-2013,

over 1,000 seniors participated in eight fairs featuring presentations, workshops and information kiosks on topics of interest to seniors, including programs and services for seniors, elder abuse prevention, nutrition, financial and legal questions, physical and mental health, safety and security.

Through our Action Plan for Seniors, Ontario will be a province where seniors are valued and respected as integral members of their community. It is vital that we support our seniors so they can remain active and engaged, leading independent, productive lives in comfort, dignity and good health.

## Improving skills training and addressing youth employment

In 2013, Ontario's job market grew by 95,700 net jobs. 2014 is off to a similarly strong start, with 6,000 net jobs gained in January and even more in February. In comparison, Quebec lost nearly 50,000 jobs in 2013 and a further 25,000 jobs in January 2014. Moreover, Ontario's economic recovery continues to outpace that of the United States.

However, youth unemployment is 16.4 per cent, twice as high as the overall unemployment rate. To help young people take their first crucial steps into the workforce, the government launched the **Ontario Youth Jobs Strategy** in 2013. Over the next two years, it will invest \$295 million to create roughly 30,000 employment opportunities for youth across the province, while promoting innovation and entrepreneurship. As of April 4, 2014, the Strategy's **Youth Employment Fund** has helped employers across Ontario offer 10,287 four-to-six month job and training placements.

*To attract skilled workers, the Town of Cochrane is conducting an aggressive marketing campaign with the help of MRA's Rural Economic Development Program. The initiative includes outreach to Aboriginal workers and skilled immigrants to fill vacant positions and meet industry demand.*

*A \$29.3-million investment from Ontario is helping Sir Sandford Fleming College build new state-of-the-art education and training facilities. The 87,000-square-foot Kawartha Trades and Technology Centre, scheduled to open in September 2014, will provide new space and equipment for students training in areas such as carpentry, masonry, welding, plumbing and machining.*

*The employment landscape in small communities is changing. By working with us to develop a Business Retention and Expansion strategy and a skills gap analysis, towns like Blyth and Wingham are identifying innovative ways to attract newcomers and provide specialized training to existing residents looking for work.*

As part of the Ontario Youth Jobs Strategy, the Province introduced **Youth Skills Connections** last year to provide youth with the skills and training that employers are looking for. Delivered in partnership with business, labour and educators, it will provide youth with transferable, industry-recognized skills.

Through the Strategy's **Ontario Youth Innovation Fund**, the Government will be launching an **Internship Program** in spring 2014. Aimed at post-secondary students, it will enable technical problem solving in an industry setting, enhancing experiential learning opportunities and transferring knowledge and discovery into economic impact. In addition, the **Campus-Linked Accelerator Program** and **On-Campus Entrepreneurship Activities** will offer experiential learning opportunities in the field of entrepreneurship to youth aged 18 to 29.

**Stepping up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed**, released in June 2013, is the province's first-ever cross-government youth strategy. As well as guiding

the Ontario government's decision-making, it serves as a resource for youth sector partners, providing a common vision, guiding principles and a set of priority outcomes to align their work. Stepping Up identifies seven themes and 20 evidence-based outcomes to define wellbeing for Ontario's youth. While most of Ontario's young people are thriving, Stepping Up identifies particular groups of youth who are more likely to require additional support to help reach their full potential, including youth living in rural and remote communities who face limited access to opportunities and youth services.

The **Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities (PCYO)**, a new permanent advisory body to the Government comprised of youth, young professionals and youth allies, helped to guide the development of Stepping Up and is engaged in its implementation. Through its membership the PCYO provides a voice for rural youth in the review and feedback of government initiatives. This rural perspective is also incorporated through the review of youth programs and services across government.



Quality education lays the foundation for rewarding careers and creates a skilled workforce. The Ontario government has shown its commitment to ensure rural Ontario students have access to the same excellent education as urban students. Since 2002/2003, **funding for rural students** has increased by 61 per cent. In addition to building and renovating schools, our government is implementing full-day kindergarten across rural Ontario to give our kids the best possible start in life.

Through the 2013/2014 **Grants for Student Needs**, Ontario has provided \$51.1 million to remote and rural school boards to reflect the greater costs they incur purchasing goods and services, \$211.6 million for transporting students to and from school and \$4.8 million to support the community use of schools after hours.

To allow students to focus their education on career-relevant skills — from horticulture to construction to hospitality and tourism — the Ministry of Education created the **Specialist High School Major**. Students who graduate from this program receive a special designation on their diploma, letting employers and postsecondary institutions know they have the specialized knowledge and skills to succeed in their chosen field.

**Future Entrepreneurs** is a curriculum support toolkit that introduces students in Grades 7 to 10 to the skills and mindset of entrepreneurship using role models, case studies and interactive activities. Meanwhile, the **High School Entrepreneurship Outreach** program helps students develop their entrepreneurial talents. Introduced in 2013 as part of the Ontario Youth Jobs Strategy, the program funds community-based organizations to share their expertise with local students.

**Enterprising** students can put their formal learning to work with Summer Company. The Ontario program provides hands-on business training and mentoring, and up to \$3,000 in awards to help students aged 15 **to 29 start and run their own summer business**. In addition, the Rural Summer Jobs Service helped over 1,400 employers create more than 4,000 summer jobs for rural students in 2013.

Increasingly, **postsecondary education is a prerequisite for**

many jobs. Ontario's publicly assisted colleges are active at over 100 locations across the province, serving over 185,000 students. Many of these locations are in small, northern and rural communities, providing opportunities for rural students to study closer to home. These college locations also serve as local hubs and often provide important support for regional economic **development, jobs and innovation**.

The government also provides Ontario Distance Grants, which help OSAP-eligible students who live more than 80 kilometres from the closest publicly assisted Ontario postsecondary institution to offset their commuting or travelling costs. In 2012/13, Ontario provided \$5 million in Distance Grants to support 13,000 students from remote and rural areas. Furthermore, OSAP-eligible Francophone students who attend full-time studies in French are now eligible for Ontario Distance Grants even if there is another institution closer to home. This expanded eligibility criteria is expected to benefit about 1,000 additional French-speaking students in 2013/14.

To help ensure postsecondary education is affordable to every qualified student, the government recently expanded the **30% Off Ontario Tuition Grant** to include private institutions and students in their final year of a co-op program. This will benefit about 5,000 more students across the province.

Meanwhile, in 2012/13, 69,838 students took courses through **OntarioLearn**, a consortium of the province's 24 publicly assisted colleges that pools the delivery of online courses to maximize student choice.

The \$45 million **Northern Training Partnership Fund (NTPF)**, a three-year skills training program, was created in 2010 to help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal northern Ontarians benefit from economic development opportunities. The NTPF supported 22 skills training projects that provided resource-related training and on-the-job work experience.

To empower Aboriginal youth to create positive change in Aboriginal communities across Ontario, the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs has supported a number of initiatives to cultivate young leaders, including Right To Play's **Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY)** program. The Ministry also forged a partnership with One Laptop

Per Child Canada from 2010 to 2013 to deliver affordable laptops customized with Aboriginal content and learning tools to every child aged 6-12 in five First Nations

communities in Ontario. Over 1,000 laptops have been provided to children and teachers in the participating communities in Ontario.

*Over 4,500 youth and community members have participated in Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) activities, and 35 full-time jobs for community mentors have been created.*

Our future prosperity depends on giving young people the right skills, experiences and supports they need to succeed in today's global economy. We will continue to tackle those challenges and ensure success by partnering with employers, educators, industry, labour and not-for-profit organizations.

### Attracting and integrating newcomers

Demographics show that Ontario's population is aging and birth rates are low. Without further immigration, the labour force will not grow as quickly as needed to meet industry demands. Ontario launched **A New Direction:**

**Ontario's Immigration Strategy** in November 2012. The strategy's objectives include attracting a skilled workforce and building a stronger economy; helping newcomers and their families achieve success; and leveraging the global connections of Ontario's diverse communities. The proposed **Ontario Immigration Act** affirms the government's commitment to existing settlement and integration programs across the province, including those in rural and Northern Ontario.

Through Ontario's Immigration Strategy, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration is committed to increasing Francophone immigration and improving access to services. The Strategy sets a **target of five per cent**



**Francophone immigration** to Ontario. This target is being pursued in a variety of ways:

- A Francophone version of the **Municipal Immigration Information Online website** ([www.immigrationfrancophone-ontario.ca](http://www.immigrationfrancophone-ontario.ca)) was launched in September 2013 to promote Ontario's communities to Francophone newcomers. It will support municipalities by providing immigration information and tools to help these new immigrants.
- The Government program to provide non-credit English and French language training has expanded its eligibility criteria, allowing immigrants whose first language is French to access the ministry's **English as a Second Language** (ESL) course. This change could benefit more than 1,000 Francophone immigrants every year.
- The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration successfully proposed a project under the Canada-Ontario Agreement on French Language Services 2013–2018 to fund initiatives in pursuit of Ontario's five per cent Francophone immigration

target. Initiatives could include projects such as communicating the benefits of hiring highly skilled Francophone newcomers to Ontario employers or providing better on- and post-arrival information to Francophone newcomers. According to the Agreement, the Government of Canada may pay up to 50 per cent of the eligible expenses for selected initiatives under the project.

To help employers succeed in the global competition for talent, the provincial government established the **Ontario Provincial Nominee Program** (PNP). Through this program, Ontario nominates investors, international students and skilled foreign workers and their families for permanent resident status based on their ability to contribute economically to the province. Nominees must then apply to the federal government for Canadian permanent resident status. In 2013, the federal government allocated 1,300 nominations to Ontario's PNP — a number that increased to 2,500 in 2014. Going forward, the Province will make changes to the program to better respond to Ontario communities, including rural and francophone communities.

*With population growth well below the provincial average, Brockville was selected by the Ontario government to implement programs that build immigration capacity in rural communities. The municipality is fostering a welcoming climate for immigrants as a first step towards an aggressive immigration recruitment strategy.*

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration's **Municipal Immigration Information Online (MIIO) Program** provides an innovative partnership model for engaging municipal governments. The program funds the development of municipal government online hubs which deliver local immigration information and work to attract and integrate newcomers into Ontario communities, including rural communities that immigrants might not otherwise consider. A first in Canada, MIIO websites benefit local communities by attracting newcomers to settle and fill labour market gaps, contribute to the local economy and bring in new investment.

**MIIO complements MRA's Community Immigrant Retention in Rural Ontario (CIRRO)** initiative, which provides information and best practices on attracting and retaining newcomers for future economic prosperity. Since 2011, over 200 individuals have been trained on the CIRRO approach.

Through the immigration strategy, our focus continues to be attracting highly skilled workers and their families, supporting them communities throughout Ontario and growing a globally connected economy.

## **Supporting Aboriginal people in rural Ontario**

While most Aboriginal people in Ontario live in urban areas, 34 per cent live on reserves or in rural communities. The provincial government is creating jobs, improving social conditions and promoting economic sustainability for Aboriginal people in Ontario. Through a number of ministries, the Ontario government invests about \$900 million annually in programs and services for Aboriginal people across the province.

# Moving forward

## Improving access to rural health care

Ontario is moving ahead with strategic rural health care investments. Thanks to an additional \$20 million a year over the next three years — a commitment made at a time when most hospital budgets were frozen — the **Small and Rural Hospital Transformation Fund** will help improve patient care in up to 64 hospitals across the province.

To help patients with chronic health conditions, the Ontario Telemedicine Network's **Telehomecare Expansion Project** is building on a highly successful two-year pilot. By 2015, the program will expand to reach more than 30,000 patients in a number of Local Health Integration Networks.

## Addressing aging

To support the development of **age-friendly communities**, the government is developing a grant program to encourage local planning and projects, as well as a recognition program that salutes communities that have launched age-friendly initiatives.

Meanwhile, the government's 2012 Budget commitment to increase funding for **community care** by four per cent a year for three years will mean homecare services for 90,000 more seniors.



## Improving skills training and addressing youth employment

The government has committed \$42 million over three years to establish **Ontario Online**: a collaborative Centre of Excellence in technology-enabled learning, governed and operated by colleges and universities. Ontario Online will improve students' learning experiences by providing the flexibility to learn wherever and whenever works best for them. Through Ontario Online, students will have access to high-quality online courses that are recognized for credit across multiple institutions. An initial suite of courses will be offered by the 2015/16 academic year.

On the skilled trades front, Ontario is investing \$3 million to prepare 200 people to become apprentices by providing training opportunities through the construction of **Pan Am and Parapan Am Games infrastructure projects**. By expanding the province's Pre-Apprenticeship Training program, this initiative allows trainees to develop their job skills and gain valuable work experience with the skilled trades organizations contracted to build world-class facilities for the 2015 Games. Venues include a number of rural communities: Mono and Caledon for equestrian events, Oro-Medonte and Milton for cycling and Welland and Minden Hills for canoeing and kayaking.

And to help set young people in rural Ontario on the path to good careers, the Ontario government will once

again offer the **Rural Summer Jobs Service**. In 2014, this program will provide a hiring incentive of \$2/hour for eligible employers that create summer jobs in rural areas for students between the ages of 15 and 30.

## Attracting and integrating newcomers

To help meet the province's future labour market needs and support regional economic growth, the government introduced the proposed Ontario Immigration Act in February 2014. **If passed, it would enable Ontario to set immigration targets** to attract more skilled immigrants. Meanwhile, initiatives like MRA's Community Immigrant Retention in Rural Ontario program will continue to deliver forward-thinking support to rural communities to help address changing demographics and other economic realities.

## Supporting Aboriginal people in rural Ontario

Ontario continues to strengthen its relationship with Aboriginal people by working together to create social and economic opportunities for Aboriginal people and by finding ways to support meaningful employment and business development for **Aboriginal people in all economic sectors**. **At MRA, that means working** with the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs to adapt and develop tools and resources to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal people and find innovative ways to strengthen Aboriginal communities.



*Infrastructure is essential to delivering services to Ontarians and to drive Ontario's economic growth and prosperity. According to a 2013 Conference Board of Canada report, every \$100 million invested in public infrastructure boosts the province's GDP by \$114 million. By funding critical infrastructure projects focused on roads, bridges, water and wastewater systems, the provincial government is ensuring rural communities are resilient, thriving and open for business.*

## What we've heard

Municipalities continually face financial challenges, with many priorities competing for limited resources. The number one request we hear is for a permanent fund that gives municipalities the stability and predictability they need to make strategic long-term infrastructure plans. We also heard that small communities want help in identifying infrastructure priorities so they can make the best investment decisions.

In today's fast-changing world, infrastructure means more than highways, bridges, sewers and water treatment plants. To better serve citizens and attract business investment, communities also need telecommunications infrastructure such as high-speed broadband Internet service.

## What we're doing

Building Together, Ontario's long-term infrastructure plan, provides a strategic framework to guide infrastructure investment decisions over the next decade. As part of implementing Building Together, the province launched the **Municipal Infrastructure Strategy** in 2012. The goals of the strategy include making good asset management planning universal, optimizing use of the full range of infrastructure financing tools and addressing the structural challenges facing small and rural communities.

**The Province also launched the Municipal Infrastructure Investment Initiative (MIII)** in 2013 to help municipalities address critical infrastructure projects and prepare asset management plans. The initiative commits nearly \$90 million in funding to help municipalities identify and prioritize their infrastructure needs and fund critical projects, as well as \$9 million to assist them in preparing detailed asset management plans.

Meanwhile, the 2013 Ontario **budget included a \$100 million Small, Rural and Northern Municipal Infrastructure Fund** to support capital and asset management investments in critical infrastructure, including municipal roads, bridges, water and wastewater projects. The Fund also provided additional support to municipalities with populations of less than 5,000 to complete asset management plans, ensuring that the highest priority projects are identified.

Of the municipalities receiving funding in the last two years through these programs, 86 per cent had populations under 10,000.

The government also recognizes how crucial high-speed Internet is to the success of rural communities. **Between 2007 and 2012, the Rural Connections Broadband Program** invested over \$29 million in 52 rural broadband networks in southern Ontario, attracting \$2 in investment from the telecommunications sector for every \$1 of public money. As a result, more than half a million more rural residents and businesses now have access to broadband services. Through the **Eastern Ontario Regional Network**, the Province is investing \$55 million to ensure over 95 per cent of residents in rural eastern Ontario have access to broadband. Meanwhile, the \$32.8 million **Building Broadband in Rural and Northern Ontario** initiative — due to be completed this spring — invested in seven networks to provide high-speed Internet access in hard-to-serve areas of the province, including 21 First Nations communities in the remote northwest.

*Communities in the City of Kawartha Lakes are getting a facelift. With the help of MRA Rural Economic Development Program funding, a new downtown revitalization coordinator will oversee streetscape and façade redesigns, heritage building conservation projects and community improvement plans in places such as Lindsay, Coboconk, Fenelon Falls and Norland.*

*Thanks to funding from the Small, Rural and Northern Municipal Infrastructure Fund, Owen Sound is getting new sewers to reduce flooding, while upgrades to the Oliphant Water Treatment Plant in South Bruce Peninsula will improve the quality and reliability of the local water supply.*

*The new Mississippi Bridge under construction in Lanark County will support heavy truck traffic — just one of the projects benefiting from the provincial government's \$11-million infrastructure investment in Eastern Ontario.*

*The Festival Theatre in Port Stanley is a key contributor to the economy of this Lake Erie community. To help the historic playhouse expand its seating capacity and complete much-needed upgrades, the government of Ontario has provided nearly half a million dollars in RED Program grants.*



# Moving forward

Infrastructure is a shared responsibility. Going forward, the Ontario government will continue working with its municipal partners to ensure their recommendations and concerns are reflected in future infrastructure funding initiatives.

Improved infrastructure increases productivity, creates jobs and strengthens the economy. Since 2003, the Province has invested nearly \$100 billion in public infrastructure. These investments have helped municipalities repair and upgrade roads and bridges, revitalize community infrastructure and modernize and expand transit systems. This level of investment supports approximately 100,000 jobs each year

Further building on its commitment to support long-term infrastructure planning, the Province introduced **Bill 141**, the proposed *Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act* in November 2013. If passed, the proposed legislation would require the Province to regularly table a 10-year infrastructure plan, set out principles to improve infrastructure planning and prioritization, promote quality infrastructure design and enhance involvement of apprenticeships in certain provincial projects.

Meanwhile, the 2013 Budget commits MRA and the Ministry of Infrastructure to considering options for

establishing a **permanent rural municipal infrastructure program** that includes asset management planning, as well as formula- and merit -based components to provide predictable, reliable and sustained funding.

To ensure the best use of infrastructure dollars, we will continue to work with rural communities as they develop and refine **asset management plans** that drive longer-term planning. By identifying priorities, strategic asset management plans lay the groundwork for partnerships between the Province, businesses and communities to forge solutions and make smart investments.

Access to affordable broadband connectivity at globally competitive speeds is a key ingredient to advance innovation, promote economic growth and social progress, and provide for the effective, efficient delivery of government programs and services. To develop a framework that supports growth of the **digital economy** (including broadband connectivity), MRA will work with key partner ministries, including Economic Development, Trade and Employment, Research and Innovation, Northern Development and Mines, and Aboriginal Affairs. Finally, we will also work with the federal government and with local partners to find new ways to continue filling gaps in **broadband service** in rural Ontario.

# Investing in Business and Regions



*Healthy economies support healthy, vibrant communities and regions. That's why Ontario is focused on building regional economies, helping home-grown businesses compete on the global stage and attracting new job-creating investments to the province. In 2012, Ontario's rural communities contributed \$106 billion in economic output — nearly 20 per cent of the province's GDP.*

## What we've heard

Rural Ontario is home to innovative industrial hubs. From advanced auto production, mining and forestry to a growing agri-food sector and a dynamic retail sector, rural communities embody economic diversification.

To leverage that success, business executives, municipal leaders and economic development officers are calling on the provincial government to consolidate and streamline programs, make information on those programs more easily accessible in one place, work at the speed of business and provide a predictable, globally competitive tax environment.

We've also heard from partners just how much can be achieved when all levels of government work together with universities, local business and local communities to promote a unified vision of regional economic development that is informed by robust market intelligence.

Successful small businesses are one of the largest job creators. To foster more entrepreneurship, communities have identified the need for regional incubators, mentorship opportunities and other forms of business support. Finally, to ensure continued growth and innovation, we need to help develop future generations of rural leaders.

*Ontario is helping Pillar5 Pharma Inc. expand production at its Arnprior manufacturing facility, creating 56 new jobs and keeping 94 more in the community. With support from the Eastern Ontario Development Fund, Pillar5 can increase its operations by installing two new advanced production lines for the manufacturing and packaging of eye care products.*

## What we're doing

We know how important it is to help municipalities adapt to changing economic conditions. Since 2003, Ontario has invested \$167 million in 468 **Rural Economic Development (RED)** projects, generating more than \$1.2 billion in local economic activity and creating more than 35,000 jobs. The RED program continues to provide funding to help communities improve local economic development and promote economic growth.

MRA has also launched a number of initiatives designed to strengthen rural communities across the province:

- The **First Impressions Community Exchange (FICE)** is a cost-effective program designed to reveal the first impressions a community makes on visitors, investors and potential new residents. Since the Ontario government initiated the FICE program in 2005, it has been successfully implemented in more than 220 communities across the province.
- **Business Retention and Expansion (BR+E)** is a community-based economic development program with a focus on supporting existing businesses. The BR+E program helps communities and regions identify actions to retain and create local jobs. Since 2005, more than 200 BR+E projects have been undertaken across rural Ontario.
- **Downtown Revitalization** focuses on the historic commercial cores of Ontario's towns. The program provides training, support and market analysis tools to attract new business, create and retain jobs and develop comprehensive plans to revitalize the heart of the community. Since 2004, more than 50 communities in Ontario have improved their commercial vacancy rates through the program.
- **Analyst** is a web-based tool that provides data on regional economies and workforces to help

communities create solid economic development plans and build strong regional economies. Since its launch in February 2013, Analyst has contributed to 190 different economic development initiatives across Ontario.

- Since **Performance Measurement Resources for Economic Development** was launched in 2013, almost 200 economic development professionals have used these tools to measure the effectiveness of their economic development strategies.
- Launched in 2011, **Community Economic Development 101** has helped more than 450 newly elected municipal officials gain insights into economic activity in their communities.

The agri-food sector is not only a major player in rural communities, it's an important driver of the province's economy. This is why we have moved forward with an **Agri-Food Strategy**.

Each year, the agri-food sector generates more than \$34 billion in gross domestic product and supports 740,000 jobs — roughly one in every nine jobs across Ontario.

The sector also includes a wide spectrum of businesses, from farms, food processing plants and distributors to retailers and restaurants. On top of this, an assortment

of innovative companies are producing leading-edge, agriculturally sourced products such as bio-plastics and biodiesel.

Last fall, Premier Wynne issued a challenge to the industry to double its growth rate and create 120,000 jobs by 2020. To meet this challenge, the government has adopted a cross-government approach to help the sector better leverage new markets both at home and internationally.

To capitalize on the growth potential of Ontario's thriving wine and grape industry, we launched the **Wine and Grape Strategy** in 2009. Last year, the value of Ontario's grape production hit a record \$100 million, while VQA wine sales in Ontario have increased by \$100 million since 2008.

To position Ontario's grape and wine industry for further success, the Province has invested \$75 million over five years in a renewed Wine and Grape Strategy. Growth in VQA wines, as well as renewed efforts to promote wine tourism, will support Ontario farmers, attract tourism and new businesses, create more jobs and build a stronger economy.

Meanwhile, the **Local Food Fund** was launched in September 2013 to support local food networks: networks that connect agri-food businesses and



local food supporters within a region. Administered by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ministry of Rural Affairs, the three-year initiative provides up to \$10 million per year to support innovative local food projects and help promote the good things that are grown, harvested and made in Ontario. To date, the Fund has supported 64 initiatives that are increasing sales of Ontario foods, creating jobs and increasing investment in the province's agri-food sector.

To help spur innovation, the Ontario government created the **Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence**. This annual program recognizes outstanding agri-food innovators, including producers, processors and organizations — 325 in total since 2007. Each year, 50 awards are given out, worth \$425,000.

Many programs spearheaded by the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment are also benefiting rural Ontario:

- The **Eastern Ontario Development Fund (EODF)** and **Southwestern Ontario Development Fund (SODF)** together have created and retained more than 24,000 jobs in Ontario across a wide range of sectors, including auto parts, aerospace, food processing, pharmaceuticals and tourism. Fifty per cent of the projects that have received support are in communities with less than 20,000 people. EODF has leveraged a total investment of \$655 million

since 2008, while SODF has leveraged \$340 million since its launch in 2012. Further north, the **Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation** has committed more than \$890 million to 5,800 projects since 2003, creating or retaining nearly 23,000 jobs.

- By certifying eligible properties as “Investment Ready,” the **Investment Ready: Certified Site Program** gives investors a greater degree of certainty when looking for development opportunities in Ontario, providing detailed information about availability, utilities, transportation access and environmental concerns. At the same time, it provides financial and marketing support to property owners.

To encourage entrepreneurial activity across the province, the Ministry of Research and Innovation launched the **Ontario Network of Entrepreneurs (ONE)** in May 2013 to connect Ontario's entrepreneurs with the in-person and online assistance they need to start, grow and succeed. The ONE network includes 57 **Small Business Enterprise Centres** that assist the growth and development of small local businesses and 17 **Regional Innovation Centres** that help entrepreneurs launch, grow and finance technology- and innovation-based businesses. In addition, Ontario's **Business Advisory Services** has a network of 24 advisors across the province that help to mentor and connect businesses with high growth potential resources they need to grow, attract financing and succeed in exporting.

*The Southwestern Ontario Development Fund is helping Dunnville-based Original Foods grow its business. The grant will allow the company to open a new processing plant, creating 150 new jobs for families in the area.*

The government also has several programs to foster youth entrepreneurship. The **Youth Investment Accelerator Fund** provides investment capital in established youth-led companies that demonstrate high growth potential. In addition, **there will also be a seed fund for young entrepreneurs**, that will provide grants to youth-led start-ups to help meet initial milestones in forming and launching their businesses. Finally, the **Youth Business Acceleration Program** provides educational programs, market intelligence services, advisory and network support to youth entrepreneurs who demonstrate market readiness.

In September 2013, the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment launched a province-wide **social enterprise strategy** to support businesses that deliver social good while generating revenue and creating jobs. Because rural social enterprises can face particular barriers to growth, the Ontario Trillium Foundation is supporting the **Rural Social Enterprise Constellation**, a partnership that helps rural individuals, organizations and networks create regional strategies for social enterprise development.

Tourism is also an important economic driver for rural communities. Through **Celebrate Ontario**, the provincial government supported 79 rural festivals and events in 2013/14, providing almost \$5 million to grow Ontario's tourism market and increase visitor spending.

Meanwhile the **Tourism Development Fund** invested more than \$1.26 million in 28 projects in 2012/13. These included pan-provincial initiatives such as cycle and culinary tourism.

*An investment from the province's Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation is helping the Wikwemikong Development Commission on Manitoulin Island build a 9,000-square-foot small business centre to accommodate six new businesses in the community.*



Natalie To, Summer Company participant, Ontario Network of Entrepreneurs (ONE) | Toto's Shop (Hamilton)

To help Aboriginal communities prosper and benefit from economic opportunities, the Ontario government has created a number of initiatives.

- In July 2012, the successful **Aboriginal Loan Guarantee Program** was expanded, making an additional \$150 million available to encourage First Nation and Métis participation in Ontario's clean energy economy.
- Since 2003, the **Aboriginal Community Capital Grants Program** has provided over \$30 million to support over 112 capital grants and related feasibility studies.
- The **New Relationship Fund (NRF)** has increased economic development and skills training opportunities, along with capacity building support. Over the past five years, the NRF has committed \$85 million in funding to more than 520 projects that have created more than 540 jobs.
- The **Métis Voyageur Development Fund** has committed up to \$30 million in grants and loans over ten years to Métis entrepreneurs working in the resource sector.

A number of Aboriginal business development tools have also been created, including the **Aboriginal Business Development Toolkit**, the online **Aboriginal Business Directory** and the **Aboriginal Procurement Pilot**, which provides new business and partnership opportunities for Aboriginal businesses and helps facilitate access to government procurement opportunities.

Finally, the province's **low corporate taxes and business-friendly environment** are among the reasons Ontario ranked in the top three regions in North America for foreign direct investment in 2012. Since 2008, the government has saved businesses \$6 million, cut more than 150,000 hours of administrative work and eliminated 80,000 regulatory burdens.

Through these strategic initiatives, the Ontario government is creating a strong, diversified and globally competitive economy that will provide jobs, increase productivity and result in prosperity for all Ontarians.

*Perth County's Quality Fertilizers Incorporated is using an investment from MRA's Rural Economic Development Program to advance the development of fertilizer pellets. Derived from waste food and oils from restaurants, grocery stores and food manufacturers throughout southern Ontario, this eco-friendly innovation will divert 66,000 tonnes of organic waste from municipal landfills, adding years to their operating lives.*

*A Local Food Fund grant is helping MacLean's Ales expand its operations, increase the variety of craft beer in Ontario and create eight local jobs. The investment will help the Hanover-based producer build a state-of-the-art brewing facility for its products, which are made with local hops, malt and barley.*

# Moving forward

Ontario's government has an important role to play in ensuring businesses succeed, whether they're located on the farm, in small towns or on Bay Street. To help Ontario companies thrive and expand, the Province will **cut taxes to businesses** by \$265 million by 2016. In addition, the government has introduced **further legislation to cut red tape**. The proposed Better Business Climate Act, if passed, would see the Province work with business, academia, other levels of government, labour and non-profit organizations to develop plans for **regional economic clusters**.

Meanwhile, the **Going Global Trade Strategy** will expand the reach of Ontario's trade, including fast-growing emerging markets that are quickly increasing their share in the global economy.

The **Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) 2014**, which comes into effect on April 30, 2014, provides direction on land use planning in Ontario. It includes new and enhanced policy direction to further recognize the diversity of Ontario's rural communities and their importance to the provincial economy and overall quality of life. This is achieved by more clearly recognizing the types of uses that may occur on rural lands, such as home industries and occupations, supporting economic opportunities for agricultural uses in rural areas, providing greater flexibility for agriculture-related uses and clarifying that a broad spectrum of economic

opportunities may be allowed on farms. The PPS strikes a balance between protecting agricultural lands for the long-term while ensuring that farmers and rural communities can respond to economic development opportunities.

To make doing business in rural Ontario as easy and straightforward as possible, MRA will work with our partners to better coordinate the provision of **tools and resources for rural economic development**.

We've seen how successful regional collaboration can be and how the Eastern Ontario Development Fund and the Southwestern Ontario Development Fund have created jobs and enhanced the competitiveness of local businesses in small towns as well as big cities. To keep the momentum going across every region and every sector of this province, we will continue to coordinate **economic development support** to enable regions, clusters and businesses to succeed.

Through the **Rural Economic Development Program**, we'll help make even more communities and regions investment-ready. Finally, we plan to collaborate with the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment to help the **rural manufacturing sector innovate and grow**. Based on GDP, manufacturing is the largest industry in rural Ontario, a source of high-paying jobs and a vital contributor to the provincial economy.

*MRA's Rural Economic Development Program supported the introduction and growth of the Junior Achievement Company Program within rural areas of the Peterborough Lakelands Muskoka region. The program helps high school students turn their ideas, passions and hobbies into viable businesses.*

*With \$393,152 in funding from MRA's Rural Economic Development Program, the province is helping Collingwood-based Goodall Rubber Co. purchase new state-of-the-art machinery and establish a new fertilizer production line that will create 22 local jobs.*

*In the Francophone community of St. Albert, a provincial investment of \$1 million is helping a cheese manufacturer establish a new state-of-the-art facility. The new and improved St. Albert Cheese Co-operative operation will process 50 million litres of local milk a year and support 110 jobs.*



# Continuing the Conversation

*Complex times require thoughtful, collaborative solutions that emerge from open communication and strong relationships. We recognize that good public policy decisions start by sitting down with stakeholders, communities and regions to discuss their unique needs and learn from their successes.*

## What we've heard

Rural Ontarians are keen to engage in an ongoing dialogue, and they have called on MRA to lead that process in the context of “One Ontario” — a province where government ministries and citizens work collaboratively.

They also recognized the need to create an overarching vision for rural Ontario, encompassing actions and targets not just for government but for all partners involved.

Because information is a key part of fostering a dialogue and creating a unified vision, we need to create one

central website to gather and share that information.

Finally, stakeholders were clear: rural regions have needs distinct from urban Ontario. Moreover, Ontario as a whole is stronger when we support rural areas — areas that contribute to the health and prosperity of the entire province. MRA has a mandate to work across government to assess the effect of relevant provincial policies and programs and ensure we achieve the desired results for rural Ontario.

*In March 2014, 73 participants attended Ontario's first-ever Rural Summit, held in Cobourg, while 138 more joined in online. Participants called it an excellent day, as a cross-section of key rural stakeholders and leaders discussed how to address challenges and leverage opportunities in rural Ontario. Online, the Summit became a trending topic on Twitter.*

## What we're doing

The 2013 Ontario Budget included a commitment to consult with rural municipal partners on new infrastructure programming and consider the possibility of making it permanent as part of the 2014 budget. Last summer, the Minister of Rural Affairs and the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation co-hosted 10 **consultations across the province**, as well as a webinar, hearing from more than 500 municipal officials and staff.

Over the past year, the Minister of Rural Affairs also conducted four **rural-focused regional roundtables** to hear about the challenges facing rural communities and regions — including health care, infrastructure, regional economic development and attracting skilled workers — and discuss the innovative solutions that are making a difference.

These sessions were in addition to a number of **one-on-one meetings** with rural leaders at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association and Association of Municipalities of Ontario conferences. On these occasions, municipal leaders brought issues and

suggestions forward via delegations and regional meetings.

In March 2014, we collaborated with the Rural Ontario Institute to bring together academia, business and economic development, municipal governments and the broader public sector for the province's first-ever **Rural Ontario Summit**. Many more participants joined the conversation online.

Over the course of the day, we facilitated discussions on social and economic infrastructure that will help shape the future of rural Ontario: creating investment-ready communities; enhancing our rural workforce, including youth and immigrants; promoting sustainable economic growth and job creation in rural Ontario; and strengthening health care and social services. We also discussed how to measure and report success to create stronger, more prosperous rural communities and how to identify areas where we could do better.

# Moving forward

MRA and the Ontario government as a whole are committed to frank and open dialogue. We have gained much from the conversations and consultations we've held to date, and we will continue those conversations in every part of the province: north, south, east and west, as well as online. To that end, we are inviting all rural stakeholders to share their comments at [Ontario.ca/rural](https://ontario.ca/rural).

Through Ontario's **Open Government** initiative, the Province will open up more data and information and give the people of Ontario new and improved ways to engage in the decision-making process and development of policy.

To create open data, the government has already posted a number of computer-readable government datasets online at [Ontario.ca/opendata](https://ontario.ca/opendata), with more available in the future. To encourage open dialogue, the government will increase its engagement with the people of Ontario through current and new channels, ensuring the public has a meaningful impact on decision-making and policies. And to ensure open information, Ontario will make even more information available to the public on a proactive and ongoing basis, increasing transparency across the government.

To ensure that the policies emerging from all provincial ministries take rural Ontario into account, MRA will formalize an **enhanced rural lens** process to better understand potential implications of new policies and programs on rural communities before they are introduced. We will continue to review government initiatives to capitalize on opportunities for incremental and continuous improvement. In addition, where appropriate, we will consider striking issue-specific task forces to develop innovative approaches to address complex rural challenges and opportunities.

We'll also engage in a series of conversations focused on important rural issues leading up to the next **Rural Ontario Summit**. This input will serve as key building blocks as we work collaboratively with stakeholders, residents, business, communities and regions as we continue to build upon **our overarching vision and government priorities for rural Ontario**.

The conversations do not end there. The government is determined to be accountable to all the people of Ontario. As such, we will undertake a review to identify **key rural-specific metrics** — metrics that are practical and easy to understand — so that we can report on our progress in rural Ontario in the future.



# Moving Forward: A Summary

*At MRA, we're working to ensure rural communities across the province are healthy, vibrant and prosperous. Although Ontario continues to face challenging economic times, we believe health care, education, infrastructure and economic development are smart investments that yield big rewards.*

*That's why we have established the following priorities for 2014/15.*

## Ministry of Rural Affairs

- MRA will continue to work with the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs to assist in adapting and developing **tools and resources to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal people** and find innovative ways to strengthen Aboriginal communities.
- Through our **Community Immigrant Retention in Rural Ontario** program, MRA will continue to deliver forward-thinking support to rural communities to address changing demographics and other economic realities.
- In partnership with the Ministry of Infrastructure, MRA is considering options for establishing a **permanent rural municipal infrastructure program** that includes asset management planning, as well as formula- and merit-based components to provide predictable, reliable and sustained funding. Furthermore, to ensure the best use of infrastructure dollars, we will continue to work with rural communities as they develop and refine **strategic asset management plans** that drive longer-term planning.
- To develop a framework that supports growth of the **digital economy** (including broadband connectivity), MRA will work with key partner ministries, such as Economic Development, Trade and Employment, Research and Innovation, Northern Development and Mines, and Aboriginal Affairs. We will also work with the federal government and with local partners to find new ways to continue filling gaps in **broadband service** in rural Ontario.
- Through our ongoing **Rural Economic Development Program**, MRA will help make even more communities and regions investment-ready. Meanwhile, we will continue to coordinate **economic development support** to enable regions, clusters and businesses to succeed.
- MRA will collaborate with the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment to help the **rural manufacturing sector** innovate and grow.
- To make doing business in rural Ontario as easy and straightforward as possible, MRA will work with our partners to better coordinate the provision of **tools and resources for rural economic development**.
- To ensure that the policies emerging from all provincial ministries take rural Ontario in account, MRA will formalize an **enhanced rural lens** process to better understand potential implications of new policies and programs on the full diversity of rural communities before they are introduced.
- MRA will engage in a series of conversations focused on important rural issues leading up to the next **Rural Ontario Summit**. This input will serve as key building blocks as we work collaboratively with stakeholders, residents, business, communities and regions as we continue to build **our overarching vision and government priorities for rural Ontario**.
- MRA will undertake a review to identify **key rural-specific metrics** — metrics that are practical and easy to understand — so that we can report on our progress in rural Ontario in the future.

## Other government initiatives

- The **Small and Rural Hospital Transformation Fund** will help improve patient care by investing \$20 million a year over three years in up to 64 hospitals across the province.
- By 2015, the Ontario Telemedicine Network's **Telehomecare Expansion Project** will expand to reach more than 30,000 patients in a number of Local Health Integration Networks, helping them manage chronic health conditions.
- A new grant program will support local planning and projects to create **age-friendly communities**, while a recognition program will salute communities that have launched age-friendly initiatives.
- Meanwhile, the government's 2012 commitment to increase funding for **community care** by four per cent a year for three years will mean homecare services for 90,000 more seniors.
- The government has committed \$42 million over three years to establish **Ontario Online**, providing access to high-quality online courses that are recognized across multiple colleges and universities. An initial suite of courses will be offered by the 2015/16 academic year.
- Ontario will invest \$3 million to prepare 200 people to become apprentices by providing training opportunities through the construction of **Pan Am and Parapan Am Games infrastructure projects**.
- To help set young people in rural Ontario on the path to good careers, the Ontario government will once again offer the **Rural Summer Jobs Service**. In 2014, this program will provide a hiring incentive of \$2/hour for eligible employers that create summer jobs in rural areas for students between the ages of 15 and 30.
- To help meet the province's future labour market needs and support regional economic growth, the government introduced the proposed **Ontario Immigration Act** in February 2014. If passed, it would enable Ontario to set immigration targets to attract more skilled immigrants.
- The proposed **Infrastructure for Jobs and Prosperity Act**, if passed, will require the Province to regularly table a 10-year infrastructure plan, set out principles to improve infrastructure planning and prioritization, promote quality infrastructure design and enhance involvement of apprenticeships in certain provincial projects.
- To help Ontario companies thrive and expand, the Province will **cut taxes to businesses** by \$265 million by 2016, and it has introduced **further legislation to cut red tape**. The proposed Better Business Climate Act would see the Province work with business, academia, other levels of government, labour and non-profit organizations to develop plans for **regional economic clusters**.
- The **Going Global Trade Strategy** will expand the reach of Ontario's trade, including fast-growing emerging markets that are quickly increasing their share in the global economy.
- The **Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) 2014** will more clearly recognize the types of uses that may occur on rural lands, support economic opportunities for agricultural uses in rural areas, provide greater flexibility for agriculture-related uses and clarify that a broad spectrum of economic opportunities may be allowed on farms.
- Through Ontario's **Open Government** initiative, the Province will open up more data and information and give the people of Ontario new and improved ways to engage in the decision-making process and development of policy.