

**2025
DRAFT
PROGRAM**

**2025
ONTARIO WEST
MUNICIPAL
CONFERENCE**

7:30 AM Registration and Welcome Breakfast

- Registration and Breakfast
- Networking with Colleagues
- Visit Information Fair

8:30 AM Welcoming Remarks

- Land Acknowledgement – Emcee
- Chair of Ontario West Municipal Conference – Warden Marcus Ryan
- Chair of Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus – Mayor Amy Martin, Norfolk County
- Warden Brian Ropp – Middlesex County (Host)
- Hon. Rob Flack – Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing (10 minutes)

9:00 AM Keynote Speaker

Keynote Address by Steve Paikin, Former Host TVO's Agenda Sponsored by Enbridge

For more than 40 years, Steve Paikin has been a trusted voice for Canadians seeking perspective and intelligent analysis of current events. He is an award-winning journalist, author, and documentary producer, best known as the anchor of TVO's former flagship current affairs program, *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*. In his signature straight-forward and humorous way, Paikin's illuminating keynotes prepare organizations for what's next. He translates politicians' words into simple facts — what they're planning to do, and how this may affect business day-to-day.

10:00 AM Networking and Information Fair

- Opportunity to network with colleagues and visit information Fair

10: 30 AM Concurrent Sessions

Housing Development Tools: Leveraging Municipal Powers to Build Housing

This session will highlight practical and effective approaches that municipalities can implement using existing legislative tools under the Municipal Act, Planning Act, and Development Charges Act. With a focus on actionable strategies, the discussion will help municipal leaders, planners, and staff better understand how to navigate the current policy landscape to unlock and accelerate housing development in their communities.

Panelists:

- **Stephen D'Agostino, Managing Partner, Thomson Rogers:** Stephen will provide a legal perspective on how municipalities can maximize their existing authority to drive housing solutions, navigate complex planning frameworks, and implement development-friendly policies.
- **TBD:** Community example

Join this session to explore how municipalities can make immediate progress on housing using the tools they already have—and hear directly from leading experts on how to put those tools into action.

Infrastructure Development & Funding: To Build or Not to Build—That Is the Question

Faced with aging infrastructure, growing service demands, and limited funding, municipalities must make critical decisions about whether to invest in new builds or renovate existing assets. This session will examine the financial, operational, and strategic considerations behind major infrastructure investments—exploring how municipalities evaluate long-term needs, sustainability, and value for taxpayer dollars when making these high-stakes choices.

Panelists:

- **Chris Traini, Deputy CAO/County Engineer, County of Middlesex:** Chris will walk through the planning and decision-making process that led to the development of a new County headquarters, highlighting factors such as future growth, functionality, and long-term value.
- **Melissa Abercrombie, Director of Public Works, Oxford County:** Melissa will share why Oxford County opted to renovate their existing facility, emphasizing cost-efficiency, sustainability, and maximizing use of existing infrastructure.

Join this session to gain insight into how municipal leaders weigh the costs and benefits of new construction versus renovation—and the lessons learned along the way.

Workforce Development & Preservation: Building Regional Skilled Trades Capacity

This panel will focus on innovative local approaches to workforce development and skilled trades training that are helping rural communities grow, retain, and future-proof their labour force. As industries across Western Ontario face increasing workforce shortages, municipalities and school boards are stepping up to create long-term solutions through education, training, and regional partnerships. Panelists will explore successful models that bridge the gap between employers, educators, and community needs to ensure the next generation of skilled workers are ready and supported.

Panelists:

- **Bill Dakin, Director of IT & Financial Services and Treasurer, Municipality of Strathroy-Caradoc:** Bill will present the Skilled Trades Hub initiative—a partnership with local school boards and the Technical Training Group—focused on creating a regional trades training centre for welding and metal fabrication within Middlesex County high schools, directly addressing local workforce needs.
- **Savanna Myers, Director of Economic Development, Tourism & Culture, Grey County:** Savanna will share how Grey County's Sydenham Campus is transforming a former high school into a regional training and innovation centre, supporting workforce development, entrepreneurship, and the trades in one of Ontario's fastest-growing regions.

Join this session to explore how municipal leadership and collaboration with education and industry partners can drive local workforce success and preserve critical skilled trades in rural communities.

Mental Health Services & Support: Strengthening Community-Based Approaches

This panel will explore innovative, community-driven approaches to delivering mental health services and support across rural and small urban settings. Panelists will share practical insights into integrated service models, partnerships, and the importance of creating accessible, stigma-free spaces for care. The session will highlight how local leadership and collaboration are key to improving outcomes and meeting growing demand for mental health support in rural Ontario.

Panelists:

- **Jeffrey Hoffman, Executive Director, The Grove Wellington Guelph:** Jeffrey will share how The Grove Hubs are transforming access to youth mental health services through collaborative, wraparound supports that meet young people where they are, both geographically and emotionally.

- **TBD, Dufferin County Services and Housing in the Province (SHIP):** A representative from SHIP will provide insight into their innovative housing and mental health support programs that focus on dignity, recovery, and person-centered care in both rural and urban contexts.

Join this session to gain real-world examples of how community-based mental health initiatives are making a difference—and how your municipality or organization can play a role in building stronger, more supportive systems of care.

11:15 AM Networking and Information Fair

- Opportunity to network with colleagues and visit information Fair

11:45 AM Concurrent Sessions

Housing Affordability & Availability: Innovative Public-Private Partnerships in Action

This session will explore how innovative partnerships between municipalities and the private sector can unlock new opportunities to address housing affordability and availability. Highlighting the Gibbons Street affordable housing development in Huron County, panelists will share how collaboration, shared vision, and creative funding models can lead to meaningful progress in addressing rural housing challenges.

Panelists:

- **Meighan Wark, CAO, Huron County:** Meighan will discuss the County's approach to developing the Gibbons Street project, a forward-thinking initiative that blends municipal leadership with strategic partnerships to deliver affordable housing in a rural context.
- **John Peevers, Director of Community, Media Relations & Economic Development, Bruce Power:** John will speak to Bruce Power's \$1 million investment in the project and the company's broader commitment to supporting workforce housing and sustainable community development across the region.

Join this session to learn how public-private collaboration can help municipalities move from planning to building—and deliver tangible results for residents seeking affordable, attainable housing.

Infrastructure Development & Funding: Unlocking Opportunities for Water Systems

This session will focus on the critical need for investment in water and wastewater

infrastructure across rural and small urban municipalities—and the innovative funding and partnership models available to support it. As communities face aging systems, regulatory pressures, and limited capital, this discussion will highlight practical strategies to modernize water infrastructure through collaborative approaches and sustainable financing.

Panelists:

- **Thomas Stachowski, Manager, Business Development, EPCOR:** Thomas will share insights into EPCOR's experience delivering water and wastewater solutions across Canada, including opportunities for municipalities to partner on system upgrades, long-term asset management, and securing funding for essential infrastructure.
- **TBD**

Join this session to explore how municipalities can access funding, tap into public-private partnerships, and build resilient water systems that meet current and future community needs.

Workforce Development & Preservation: Data-Driven, People-Powered

This session will explore how data, research, and community-based planning are driving innovative workforce development strategies across rural Ontario. As municipalities grapple with persistent labour shortages and shifting demographics, panelists will highlight how actionable insights—paired with local leadership—can guide effective responses to workforce challenges and ensure long-term prosperity.

Panelists:

- **Dr. Leith Deacon, Associate Professor, Rural Planning & Development, University of Guelph:** Dr. Deacon will introduce the HEAR initiative (Health, Economy, and Adaptation in Rural Communities), which will provide a robust picture of the economic and social health of rural Ontario—critical data that supports workforce planning, retention, and policy development.
- **Dr. Ryan Gibson, Associate Professor and Libro Professor of Regional Economic Development, University of Guelph:** Dr. Gibson will share insights from the *Blueprint to Prosperity* initiative and the *Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction* strategy, demonstrating how rural regions can tackle workforce gaps by focusing on inclusive, data-informed economic development.

Join this session to learn how rural leaders can turn local data into powerful, people-focused workforce solutions—and build stronger, more resilient communities in the process.

Mental Health Services & Support: Pilot Projects Driving Change

This session will showcase innovative pilot projects that are transforming how mental health services are delivered in rural and small urban communities. With a focus on mobile response models and cross-sector collaboration, panelists will highlight how partnerships between health, emergency, and police services are reaching individuals in crisis more effectively and compassionately.

Panelists:

- **Stephen Turner, Manager of EMS, Lambton County:** Stephen will discuss the Lambton CHIC (Community Health & Integration of Care) pilot, a mobile health and crisis intervention team connecting residents to mental health supports in real time—reducing ER visits and improving outcomes for individuals in crisis.
- **Aaron Tuffin, Provincial Constable, Ontario Provincial Police – Middlesex County, West Region:** Aaron will share his experience with the Middlesex Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT), which embeds mental health professionals with frontline police officers to respond to mental health-related calls, de-escalate situations, and connect people with appropriate care.

Join this session to learn how rural communities are using innovative pilot projects to bridge service gaps, respond more effectively to mental health crises, and build more coordinated systems of care.

12:30 PM Lunch

- Sponsored by: CN
- CN will present on Railway Safety

1:30 PM Networking and Information Fair

- Opportunity to network with colleagues and visit information Fair

2:00 PM Plenary Speaker

Fireside Chat with Western Region Ministers and MPPs

Join us for an engaging and interactive Fireside Chat with prominent Ministers and Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) from Western Ontario. This plenary session offers a unique opportunity to gain insights directly from the region's key policymakers. Attendees will have the chance to ask questions, engage in meaningful dialogue, and discuss the pressing issues and opportunities facing Western Ontario. Whether you are interested in regional development, policy changes, or simply wish to better understand the political landscape, this session is designed to foster open communication and provide valuable perspectives from those shaping the future of Western Ontario. Don't miss this chance to connect with and hear from your local leaders.

3:00 PM Plenary Speaker

Closing Plenary: Disruptive Futures – What's Next for Rural Ontario?

Join us for an inspiring and thought-provoking closing plenary with **Brock Dickinson, Director of the Economic Development Program at the University of Waterloo** and one of Canada's leading futurists and economic development thinkers. Drawing on global trends and real-time innovations, Brock will challenge participants to consider what lies ahead for rural communities—from AI and automation to climate change, demographic shifts, and the evolving nature of work. With his signature energy, storytelling, and insight, Brock will leave attendees with a renewed sense of possibility—and a call to action to lead boldly in times of rapid change.

Don't miss this dynamic session that will connect the threads of the conference and launch us forward with new ideas, fresh perspectives, and practical inspiration for shaping the future of rural Ontario.

4:00 PM Closing Remarks

- Chair of Conference – Warden Marcus Ryan