

A Plan for Ontario Starts With *Listening*

By Steven Del Duca

Job creation, internet access, roads and transportation are areas that need tackling in rural Ontario.

When I travelled our province as the Ontario minister of economic development, I heard a very compelling message from business owners and families in rural, remote and small-town communities. They told me that they understood that larger cities like London and Toronto have real needs and deserve significant support from the provincial government.

But just as emphatically, they made it clear that they feel left behind by governments of all partisan stripes. They also have an expectation that Ontario's premier step up and lead everyone when the bell sounds.

And in their communities, it's been ringing for a while now.

This part of our province faces daunting challenges such as young people moving away for school or for jobs — and for good. There is also spotty internet access, which hurts local economies and isolates people, particularly seniors. Let's not forget crumbling roads, bridges and other infrastructure that rural property taxes alone cannot maintain. And there's a lack of transportation options, meaning too many people can't see their doctor, get to work or visit family and friends.

These are only a few examples. But it doesn't have to be like this.

Here's what a real plan for rural progress looks like:

We know that our agri-food sector employs more than 800,000 Ontarians and is critical for our economy. We need to continue investing in this crucial sector, both today and for decades to come.

We need to decentralize government — where possible — so that we can spur job creation in places where the cost of housing is low and quality of life is high. So, for example, when a future provincial government wants to locate a much-needed French-language university, it should be in a community like Penetanguishene.

Delivering reliable, affordable high-speed internet access to the entire province must also be an urgent priority. Today, I can text a friend on the other side of the planet, but a store owner just outside Goderich has a hard time connecting with suppliers in Picton. This is both a social and economic problem, and it needs a real solution, especially in light of the Ford government's proposal to require that high-school students take some courses online.

We need to take a hard look at uploading the roads and bridges that were dumped on rural and northern municipali-

ties by premier Mike Harris a generation ago because the provincial budget now has a far greater capacity to maintain and rebuild them when necessary.

Working with municipal leaders and their associations, it's also time to deliver genuine transportation options and connect rural communities by creating co-ordinating bodies and funding mobility solutions.

And finally, perhaps more importantly than any one policy change, Queen's Park needs to fundamentally alter the way it works with rural Ontario.

In short, it's time to stop lecturing and start listening. Respectfully.

These necessary and achievable ideas form a real plan for rural progress — one that gives the people and places left behind for too long a reason for hope that we will finally be able to move all of Ontario forward, together.

Steven Del Duca was a member of provincial parliament from 2012 until 2018. During that time, he served as Ontario's minister of transportation and minister of economic development and growth.



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