

GROWING STRONG RURAL COMMUNITIES

A CONSULTATION PAPER

JUNE 2004

DRAFT

INTRODUCTION

Strong rural communities are key to the health and vitality of Ontario. Ontario's rural communities are diverse and have different characteristics and unique needs. Rural communities include smaller centres adjacent to major cities, small towns and villages, First Nations communities and remote locations in the North. This diversity is the starting point for developing a plan for Ontario's rural communities. The McGuinty government wants to better understand the priorities of rural communities to make the changes that are needed to ensure they enjoy improved prosperity, environmental well-being and a greater quality of life.

The McGuinty government wants to give rural residents and stakeholders a real voice in shaping a plan for growing strong rural communities. A plan for rural Ontario will articulate a shared vision of how we will work together to grow strong, safe, livable communities throughout the province.

Defining 'rural Ontario' is complex.* Different definitions of rural communities can touch on a broad range of considerations, such as:

- population size;
- population density;
- proximity to urban centres;
- strength of economic linkages with neighbouring urban centres;
- predominant types of economic activity;
- extent of economic diversification;
- variety and type of services provided to the community; and,
- the landscape.

WE NEED A PLAN FOR RURAL ONTARIO

Communities across Ontario face financial, economic, social and environmental challenges. Rural communities need a different approach than urban centres to address these challenges because they often cover broad geographic areas, and have smaller, more dispersed populations, smaller tax bases and a higher dependency on resource industries. Some rural areas are also without municipal structure making it even more difficult to address the challenges they face.

A plan for rural Ontario will provide a framework for the provincial government to support the building of strong rural communities, reflecting their diversity and uniqueness. It will build on the benefits of existing policies, programs and services and provide a co-ordinated approach across all provincial government ministries for developing new policies, programs and services to address the future needs of rural Ontario. The rural plan will also articulate strategic actions for the government and key stakeholders.

* There are various approaches to defining rural communities, with definitions varying according to the purpose of future programs and services. Some definitions aim to capture all communities outside major urban centres (e.g. cities of Hamilton, Ottawa, London, Windsor, the Greater Toronto Area, and the Regions of Niagara and Waterloo), while others focus on smaller towns and remote communities.

This plan for rural Ontario goes beyond past efforts that focused on economic development. This is an opportunity to put forward a comprehensive vision that takes into account the need for rural communities to have sustainable fiscal capacity and infrastructure, strong economies, a healthy social climate and a clean and healthy environment.

This Rural Plan is a key component of growing Ontario's strong communities.

WE NEED TO HEAR FROM YOU

We want you to help us shape a plan for rural Ontario. We need your advice to identify changes to improve the economic prosperity, environmental well-being and quality of life in your community. Your input will help us better understand the priorities of rural communities and key areas for action.

What's working now? How could policies, programs or services be improved or enhanced? What new ideas do you have? We want to take advantage of what is already working and identify future directions and innovative approaches that can be pursued.

MOVING FORWARD

The provincial government is consulting on a number of initiatives over the upcoming months. Feedback from these consultations will help inform how the province will help grow strong communities.

In addition, the McGuinty government has announced a Northern Prosperity Plan to help northern communities attract and retain investment and jobs. This Plan involves a range of targeted initiatives to promote northern prosperity that responds to the challenges and opportunities of this region. The Rural Plan and the Northern Prosperity Plan complement one another in building strong and sustainable rural and northern communities.

A VISION FOR RURAL ONTARIO

STRONG RURAL COMMUNITIES WITH PROSPEROUS ECONOMIES, RICH CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE, AND THE CAPACITY AND LEADERSHIP TO SUSTAIN AND ENHANCE A HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE.

To support this vision, the plan for rural Ontario will focus on four themes. These four themes are inter-related and together contribute to the development of strong rural communities. They are:

- Sustainable Municipal Fiscal Capacity and Infrastructure;
- Strong Economies;
- Healthy Social Climate; and,
- Clean and Healthy Environment.

For each of the four themes, this consultation paper:

- describes challenges facing rural communities;
- sets out goals for growing strong rural communities; and,
- presents some ideas for discussion on achieving these goals.

Strong rural communities strive to have:

- sufficient populations to sustain local economies (e.g. agriculture, resource development, manufacturing and tourism) and community services;
- reliable access to health-care services;
- quality education close to home;
- adequate and well-maintained infrastructure that supports economic prosperity, public safety and a high quality of life;
- diversified economies that provide a range of employment opportunities including well-paying, highly skilled jobs;
- clean and healthy natural environments that support public health and safety, economic activity and a high quality of life;
- active community participation and necessary leadership to build on community strengths; and,
- cultural and social services that promote diversity and vitality.

THEME: SUSTAINABLE MUNICIPAL FISCAL CAPACITY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Strong, healthy rural communities – built on a foundation of adequate and sustainable resources – offer residents a high quality of life. Municipalities with sufficient revenue are able to provide services and make necessary capital investments to meet the economic, social and environmental needs of their communities.

All municipalities face challenges in delivering the services needed by their communities. Rural municipalities, however, face particular challenges in building the adequate capacity (fiscal, human resource, technical) to meet those needs and deliver services. As a result, they face difficult decisions on setting priorities and allocating scarce dollars to provide necessary services.

GOALS

Strong rural communities will have:

- the fiscal, human resource and technical capacity to deliver their municipal service responsibilities and engage in long-term planning;
- adequate and well-maintained infrastructure to support economic prosperity, public health and safety, and a high quality of life; and,
- fiscal sustainability.

Elliot Lake, by diversifying its economy and tax base, has reinvented itself from a mining town into a centre for retirement living and all-season tourism. The city purchased vacant housing stock to market to more than 3,000 retirees.

City officials created jobs by establishing a drug and alcohol treatment centre, attracting a field station of Laurentian University and expanding tourism infrastructure.

The city is developing 4,500 cottage lots, expanding recreational facilities and turning its mining heritage into a tourism focus. Discovery North, a regional centre for business development, has also helped more than 100 small businesses start or expand.

MUNICIPAL FISCAL CAPACITY

Since municipal operating budgets must always be balanced, a number of factors shape municipal budget decisions on how to bridge gaps between revenues and expenditures. These include:

- determining if property tax increases are needed to raise revenue, if they can remain the same or if they can be lowered;
- raising revenue from other sources (e.g. fees and charges);
- examining operating expenditures and the levels of services provided; and,
- spending on capital either directly, through reserve contributions or by debt servicing.

For rural municipalities, there are additional considerations including:

- small tax bases with limited diversity and limited potential to grow;
- high service delivery costs, particularly related to policing, land ambulance and social housing; and,
- high infrastructure costs particularly for the maintenance of roads and bridges. (e.g. the Municipality of Chatham-Kent is responsible for maintaining 820 bridges).

Many rural municipalities have small tax bases with limited diversity, leaving them open to demographic shifts or market forces. Some rely too heavily on the residential tax class. Others have a high proportion of farm assessment, which is at 25 per cent of the residential tax rate. Others are particularly dependent on their industrial tax base, leaving them vulnerable when plants or industries close.

Rural municipalities tend to have low or declining assessment growth, which also affects municipal fiscal capacity. Insufficient development can result in less property tax revenue and higher local property tax rates. In the longer term, tax increases can cause a downward spiral in revenues since high tax rates may make municipalities less attractive to business and industry.

Different municipalities have different challenges with respect to fiscal capacity. Some municipalities reduce operating costs by forming partnerships, engaging in capital asset management and using new technologies (e.g. GIS technology). Others defer their capital expenditures, although this is not sustainable in the long term. Discussions related to access to revenues will form part of the government's broader dialogue with municipalities.

GeoSmart is a provincial funding program designed to facilitate the implementation of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in municipalities, First Nations communities and Conservation Authorities.

GIS technologies support the delivery of a variety of public sector businesses such as:

- land use planning;
- nutrient management;
- emergency response;
- economic development; and,
- infrastructure and asset management.

The Municipality of Chatham-Kent completed a GIS project in 2003 and as a result, expects to realize over \$790,000 annually in cost savings and missed revenue opportunities.

STRENGTHENING MUNICIPAL FISCAL CAPACITY

Here are some examples of how municipal fiscal capacity can be strengthened. Can you suggest other approaches to reach the goals of sustainable fiscal, human resource and technical capacity?

- Exploring creative approaches to diversify local economies and attract investment to generate revenue (e.g. encouraging the remediation and redevelopment of brownfields).
- Assisting municipal staff to develop the capacity to carry out 1) strategic planning, 2) capital asset management (including asset inventories and related analysis, capital

budgeting and planning) to better control infrastructure costs, and 3) business-case preparation to access funding.

- Encouraging partnerships among municipalities to capitalize on economies of scale, and professional and technical expertise, thereby lowering costs and expanding the professional capabilities of municipal staff.
- Encouraging the sharing of best practices among municipalities to achieve cost savings and more cost-efficient and effective ways to deliver services.

The Ontario Centre for Municipal Best Practices is a partnership between the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The Centre's website (www.municipalbestpractices.ca) is a virtual electronic library of best practices that contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of municipal services.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Much of Ontario's physical infrastructure was built in the 1950s and 1960s. Aging infrastructure requires increased maintenance and rehabilitation investment for upgrading or replacement. This creates a number of fiscal challenges for Ontario's rural municipalities.

Due to deferred maintenance over the past few decades, many hard infrastructure assets have declined significantly and now need replacement instead of repair.

Rural municipalities tend to have fewer professional staff and management tools dedicated to managing and planning for infrastructure activities. This affects their ability to access government funding and carry out good maintenance programs to help manage costs over the long term.

Clean drinking water and effective management of water and wastewater systems are essential to public health in all communities across Ontario. New government legislation and regulations regarding water quality create particular challenges for Ontario's rural municipalities. Some find it financially challenging to implement water testing, water treatment upgrades or expand water and sewage systems in response to growth-related pressures.

The proposed Canada-Ontario Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund (COMRIF) is a partnership program between the federal and provincial governments to help fund municipal rural infrastructure.

The proposed program helps small towns and rural communities comply with drinking water standards, improve sewage treatment and waste management, fix local roads and repair bridges, as well as help address other health and safety priorities.

The federal, provincial and municipal governments would invest approximately \$900 million over five years.

Roads and bridges in rural Ontario are important regional links and directly influence economic development and growth. Some rural municipalities have increased vehicular weight restrictions or closed roads and bridges that they cannot afford to maintain. This creates economic problems as the flow of goods is restricted and raises public safety concerns as emergency service vehicles are obstructed.

Ontario's rural areas offer a vast range of tourism, cultural and recreational experiences. Long-term tourism development can complement existing industries, boost local economies, create jobs and add to the quality of life in rural communities. But tourism and recreation also depend on infrastructure and many arenas, heritage buildings, theatres and community centres need repair or renewal. In addition, communities and small tourism operators find it financially difficult to comply with new water quality standards.

Addressing these infrastructure challenges can boost a rural community's economic prosperity, help maintain public health and the safety of local residents, and offer them a higher quality of life. Some vehicles for assisting rural municipalities in addressing infrastructure challenges include the proposed Canada-Ontario Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund (COMRIF), the Ontario Strategic Infrastructure Financing Authority (OSIFA) and the Infrastructure Renewal Bonds.

ADDRESSING MUNICIPAL INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

The following approaches are part of existing government programs or potential future directions that work toward the goal of adequate and well-maintained infrastructure.

What other approaches would work toward this goal?

- Developing capital asset management planning for municipal staff through training, workshops and resources. Topics could include maintaining existing infrastructure, innovative financing and new delivery mechanisms for future infrastructure needs.
- Providing technical resources to municipal staff to help them better understand and assess financing options and prepare business cases.
- Encouraging the use of new and emerging technologies and practices that reduce costs and add to the longevity of the infrastructure.
- Encouraging partnerships among municipalities and between government and other sectors to capitalize on economies of scale, and professional and technical expertise, thereby lowering costs.
- Encouraging the sharing of best practices among municipalities, through the Ontario Centre for Municipal Best Practices and the National Guide to Sustainable Infrastructure, to promote more cost-efficient and effective ways to manage infrastructure.

TELECOMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

High-speed (or broadband) telecommunication infrastructure improves rural communities' ability to access information and contributes to a higher quality of life for rural residents. This access is vital for ensuring that rural Ontario can prosper in the knowledge-based economy. Although the number of rural communities with low-speed Internet access has increased, there is a need to expand high-speed access to ensure that rural residents are on a level playing field in their ability to access information.

The Ontario government's Connect Ontario Broadband Regional Access (COBRA) Program provides funding for broadband infrastructure development in rural communities. As of 2003, Elgin, the greater Kenora area and Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry received funding to develop broadband infrastructure.

Market forces alone will not meet rural connectivity needs across the province. Rural communities often struggle to attract private sector investment for broadband infrastructure (both hard and wireless) because private investors do not see a business case for such investment. Small population bases and low population densities make it difficult to provide broadband at a reasonable cost. These impact on the range of services available to rural residents including health services such as telemedicine. As well, distance between regions and rough terrain present obstacles for putting hard infrastructure in place.

High-speed broadband connectivity (both hard and wireless) support business applications such as e-commerce, but also social services, entertainment and e-government. It enables people in rural communities to participate in a digital, diversified and innovative economy and strengthens the economic fabric of these areas by levelling the playing field for rural and urban communities.

Enhanced connectivity supports the attraction of new businesses and the retention of well-paying and highly skilled jobs in rural communities. Enhanced connectivity also contributes to a healthier social climate in rural areas. This includes improved access to medical and educational services and information.

EXPANDING TELECOMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Expanding broadband infrastructure in rural communities can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Some current and potential actions are outlined below. Can you add to this list?

- Encouraging partnership opportunities between the public sector and other sectors to invest in telecommunication infrastructure.
- Stimulating the demand for developing broadband infrastructure in rural communities by building the business case for investment by the private sector. Demand can be stimulated by: training local and small businesses in developing websites and

providing online services, teaching community members about the benefits of increased Internet use, and encouraging further provision of e-government services provided by municipalities.

- Identifying innovative options for models of broadband service delivery that Ontario has yet to embrace and could explore as alternatives to current models.

THEME: STRONG ECONOMIES

Strengthening and diversifying rural economies promotes local prosperity and supports a higher quality of life for residents through a range of employment opportunities including well-paying and highly skilled job opportunities. Among other benefits, sustainable and adaptable economies attract investment, new residents, and essential community and social services and amenities.

GOALS

Strong rural communities will have:

- prosperous economies that are diversified, innovative and provide well-paying, high-quality jobs;
- a range of employment opportunities that support a skilled labour force, including young people; and,
- revitalized downtown areas and waterfronts and redeveloped brownfields that attract investment and economic opportunity.

The Oxford Technical Training Centre was formed at a secondary school in Woodstock through an alliance of industry, government, the local college, and the local school board.

Unused space in the school was renovated and equipped to provide a technical training facility that can be operated independently from the rest of the school, up to 24 hours per day.

The Centre introduces high school students to manufacturing trades as a career, and provides skills upgrading opportunities for area workers. Currently, 69 secondary students are enrolled in the technical program, 33 college students are enrolled in a manufacturing techniques course and 56 elementary students took part in “technical camps” during March break.

In addition, a local manufacturing facility that is closing is offering technical skills training to over 100 workers through this facility.

LOCAL ECONOMIES AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Strong economies attract and retain investment, bring in new residents and provide stable employment as well as cultural, tourism and recreational amenities.

The rural economy is an important contributor to the overall health of the Ontario economy. Employment in rural Ontario is generally concentrated in the manufacturing, government, social services and service sectors. Some rural communities rely on a single industry that is often resource based. Dominant resource-based industries include agriculture, forestry and mining.

A major crisis in a particular industry can severely impact a community that is dependent on that sector. For example, trade sanctions imposed by the U.S. and 30 other countries following confirmation of a single case of BSE in Canada resulted in financial hardship for a number of industries in rural Ontario. Feedlot owners suffered the initial impact and those counties with the largest number of feedlot cattle were the hardest hit. A ripple effect extended to other businesses in rural communities, including livestock equipment companies, rural veterinarians, machinery dealers, feed suppliers and other rural-based enterprises. Diversification helps rural communities that rely heavily on one industry. Although diversification may help strengthen local economies, building on existing industries also contributes to economic success. Resource-based industries must continue to adopt innovative ideas to strengthen both their primary and value-added activities.

Communities can employ a number of economic development strategies to diversify and revitalize their economies, for example: business retention and expansion, export development and marketing the community to attract investment. Aboriginal communities can also take advantage of programs and services that form the provincial government's Building Aboriginal Economies strategy (www.aboriginalbusiness.on.ca) to promote economic development in their communities.

Strengthening local economies may include community revitalization efforts. Community revitalization involves restoring downtown areas and waterfronts and redeveloping brownfields to make a community more attractive. Revitalization efforts may also include the maintenance and preservation of historical sites that help define a community and profile its cultural and heritage assets. Revitalized communities help retain and attract residents, businesses, investment and tourists. Many rural communities have aging downtowns and undeveloped waterfronts and brownfields.

Community economic development is about local people taking responsibility for their economic future. For example, successful community-based economic development strategies are being implemented by the Township of Centre Wellington and the Town of Shelburne.

These communities each engaged their citizens in creating a long-term vision with strategic actions and initiatives to operationalize their community vision.

Building prosperous and innovative local economies is most successful when approached from the “bottom-up,” harnessing the unique characteristics, strengths and potential of the local community. It is important for a rural community to understand the requirements for success in a global and knowledge-based economy and to have the community capacity (e.g. leadership, skills, knowledge, resources) to engage in economic development efforts. A partnership with neighbouring communities is one approach to building capacity.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL ECONOMIES AND BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Listed below are some ideas for strengthening local economies and building community capacity – some involve existing government programs and others are possible future directions. How would these work in your community? What other ideas could be tried?

- Providing additional data and economic analysis tools to assist communities to strengthen their local economies, including diversification efforts [e.g. the Rural Economic Development Data and Intelligence website (REDDI), Ontario Investment Service website — tourism investment section].
- Revitalizing downtown areas and redeveloping waterfronts and brownfields to help communities become more attractive as investment opportunities, tourism destinations and places to live with rich cultural amenities (e.g. a provincial partnership with municipalities to match property tax relief to encourage the remediation of brownfield sites).
- Creating a self-assessment “tool-kit” for communities to provide them with techniques and resources to assist them in successful economic development efforts (e.g. objective assessments of community services and assets to identify strengths and weaknesses, making a case for tourism as an economic development strategy).
- Providing leadership development tools and resources to train community leaders to help guide successful economic development efforts (e.g. the provincial government’s *10 Steps to Community Action* training program that recently helped train over 20 new community leaders in Oxford County).
- Providing support for research and development in key industries leading to value-added opportunities (e.g. agriculture, mining and forestry).
- Promoting opportunities for value-added agricultural activities (e.g. agri-tourism).

The Rural Economic Development Data and Intelligence (REDDI) website (www.reddi.gov.on.ca) assists communities in local economic development efforts. REDDI provides statistical information and best practices to help communities understand their local economies and develop strategies to address their needs and priorities.

The Town of Port Hope utilized REDDI’s interactive community economic analysis tools in their strategic planning efforts. The website’s step-by-step guide, *Managing Downtown Revitalization*, helped the Town of Ingersoll design its downtown revitalization initiatives.

A SKILLED LABOUR FORCE

A skilled labour force is an essential component of a competitive and strong economy. The long-term supply of skilled labour is a concern in some rural areas where employers have difficulty filling vacancies in certain occupations or specializations. There is a need to increase the quality and quantity of skilled labour in Ontario, including tradespeople.

A number of factors contribute to the current need for skilled labour in rural communities, including the out-migration of young people and the challenge of attracting new immigrant workers and professionals (e.g. doctors) to rural areas.

There is also concern over the possibility of future skill shortages in rural communities. An aging population and a large number of anticipated retirements require rural employers to plan for possible future shortages.

It is often challenging for rural employers to offer training opportunities locally to help workers develop the skills needed to actively participate in an innovative and changing economy.

While immigration is expected to be the major source of labour force entrants in Ontario, only 5% of new immigrants in Ontario currently settle outside major urban centres.

MAINTAINING AND DEVELOPING A SKILLED LABOUR FORCE

The following are some ideas for maintaining and developing a skilled labour force. What is or would be their impact in your community? What additional approaches can you suggest?

- Providing communities and businesses with the necessary tools to help them identify skill needs in their communities.
- Working with employers to identify needs and develop actions, including apprenticeship opportunities for younger workers in leading-edge sectors (e.g. apprenticeship training tax credits to encourage employers to hire and train apprentices in skilled trades).
- Providing the necessary tools and resources for upgrading skills and retraining workers, including high school leavers, to diversify and better match skill-set demands, and support growth industries in their regions (e.g. a one-stop training and employment system to better serve apprentices, immigrants, unemployed individuals and youth in transition from school to work).
- Identifying and addressing existing gaps in social, economic, cultural and recreational services, networks and amenities offered in a community (e.g. English as a Second Language and settlement services, education and apprenticeship opportunities, and a broader range of recreational and cultural services such as theatres and museums) to attract new immigrant workers including agricultural seasonal workers, internationally-trained individuals and skilled workers.
- Working with academic institutions to offer educational opportunities to meet the skill gaps specifically identified in the local labour force.

Georgian College (Owen Sound and Orillia campuses) is addressing the local projected shortage of nurses by providing upgrading to a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing degree. People will likely practice where they have had some training. This will help address the urgency of replacing retiring health-care professionals in an area which has the oldest average population in Ontario.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Small businesses make a significant contribution to job creation and economic growth in Ontario. In rural Ontario, the majority of businesses are locally owned and operated. Owners of small and medium-sized businesses face a number of challenges that limit the potential prosperity of their local economies. Rural Ontario businesses need the knowledge, skills and capacity to compete in a global and innovative economy.

One challenge that many businesses face is difficulty in accessing financing and information for start-up, expansion and innovative ventures.

In 2003, 74.8% of rural Ontario businesses employed fewer than 10 people compared to 68.7% of businesses in urban Ontario.

Broadband telecommunication technology helps enable businesses to compete globally and opens up market opportunities nationally and internationally. Improving telecommunication capacity and skills of rural businesses and residents encourages telecommuting, promotes leading-edge business practices and extends access to information and services, which will help retain and attract businesses and workers.

Addressing barriers to business development can attract new investment and residents and build a stronger economic base.

SUPPORTING BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

What would you recommend to support business development in rural communities? Some new directions and potential approaches are listed below. What other suggestions can you offer?

- Creating community investment vehicles to address barriers to accessing capital investment, start-up funds or funding for innovative ventures (e.g. a Northern Ontario grow bonds program, investment funds and investment agencies).
- Examining the formation of partnerships and the development of clusters among rural businesses to strengthen and grow specific sectors and share benefits on a regional basis. For example, the Ontario government's Biotechnology Cluster Innovation Program aims to accelerate the development of Ontario's biotechnology clusters by supporting commercialization infrastructure projects such as research parks and other initiatives that promote entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Developing the skills and knowledge base to ensure rural businesses can effectively

Communities such as Huntsville, Brockville and New Tecumseh have identified business expansion barriers and opportunities by using Ontario's Business Retention and Expansion (BR+E) Tool-Kit.

The tool-kit aids communities in developing actions to respond to business problems. These action plans feed into community strategic planning and contribute to long-term job growth and economic prosperity.

compete in the digital economy through e-business, business expansion and marketing on a larger geographic scale.

- Providing business development and management resources, information and advice on issues such as succession planning to small and medium-sized enterprises (e.g. through government business enterprise centres and business advisory services).
- Developing a targeted investment (e.g. tourism) strategy based on community strengths, using tools such as the Ontario Investment Service to help attract sustainable new investment.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING YOUNG PEOPLE

Having a younger population in rural areas is important for growing stronger communities. According to Statistics Canada, people aged 15-24 are the most mobile demographic group. Their migration from rural to urban areas is not always balanced by new rural residents. The decline in the number of young people diminishes the local labour supply – this issue is of particular concern in Northern Ontario.

Between 1991 and 2001, rural Ontario's 15-19 year old population declined by 18.5% while urban Ontario experienced an increase of 26.5%.

Many young people view rural areas to be lacking employment and educational opportunities, as well as the social, cultural and recreational facilities that attract a younger population.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING YOUNG PEOPLE

Some opportunities for attracting and retaining young people in rural communities are listed below. Do you have any other ideas?

- Creating a community marketing strategy focused on a younger demographic group – identifying community assets that appeal to a younger population and highlighting gaps in existing educational, employment, cultural, social and recreational opportunities.
- Creating employment opportunities by encouraging businesses and educational facilities to offer a variety of apprenticeship programs, co-operative education opportunities, training programs and job fairs that profile future career opportunities.

Youth focus groups* have identified a number of rural assets that encourage them to remain in or move to rural communities.

They include:

- a sense of belonging to the community;
- a connection to the land;
- strong family ties;
- a natural setting with a variety of outdoor activities;
- open space;
- employment opportunities;
- a clean environment; and,
- a safe place to raise a family.

*The Ontario Rural Council Youth Symposium 2002.

- Supporting employment for current students (e.g. the Summer Jobs Service Program offered by the Ontario Government helps youth gain valuable work experience by providing a \$2-per-hour wage rebate to employers).
- Providing a wage rebate to rural business owners who employ new graduates.
- Maintaining contact with young people who leave the community (e.g. invitations to community events, newsletters with community updates, gift copies of local newspapers) to encourage them to return.
- Encouraging community organizations, such as 4-H Ontario, Junior Farmers and service clubs, to continue supporting education and training opportunities that would benefit the local community, provide leadership development and encourage involvement of young people in their communities.

THEME: A HEALTHY SOCIAL CLIMATE

A healthy social climate contributes to the quality of life in rural Ontario. Although access to health-care and educational services are key components, a healthy social climate also means that communities are safe and secure and residents have access to a range of recreational, cultural and heritage facilities and important social services. It also means that residents have a sense of belonging and pride in their community.

GOALS

Strong rural communities will have:

- reliable access to health-care services;
- quality education available close to home;
- access to recreational, cultural and social services; and,
- community leadership and active citizen engagement.

HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

Healthy residents and reliable access to health-care services are integral parts of a strong community. A strong community protects the health of its residents and promotes healthy lifestyles. Health-care services are sources of employment, and they contribute to the local economy while enhancing the attractiveness of the community to existing and potential residents, businesses and health-care professionals.

The Central Hastings Sustainable Community Association (CHSCA) was formed to provide health-care and other social and economic services based on broad elements of health. The goal of the association was to facilitate access to local primary health services across the Central Hastings area. A team representing a broad range of sectors including municipal representatives, District Health Council staff and health providers was formed. Municipalities represented included Madoc, Marmora and Lake, Centre Hastings, Tweed, and Tudor and Cashel. By working together to address current and long-term needs, CHSCA was successful in receiving funding for two new nurse practitioner positions.

While most Ontarians have access to a family physician, there are some families in rural areas that do not. Communities with fewer than the required number of general or family physicians are considered "underserved." In 2002, 136 communities in Ontario were considered underserved. Most of these are in rural Ontario.

Residents without a physician or other health-care professionals may rely on emergency rooms for health-care services when many rural hospitals have decreased the delivery of emergency and specialized services. Rural Ontario's high proportion of seniors also places increased demands on physicians, hospitals (especially emergency departments), home care and long-term care facilities.

The Ontario government's Primary Care Nurse Practitioner program provides increased access to primary health care services in small rural and underserved areas and expands the effective use of nurse practitioners in new clinical settings.

To provide health-care services needed by rural residents, a variety of innovative health-care delivery models have been developed. This includes telehealth and telemedicine services. The delivery of these services often depends on the availability of broadband in rural areas to provide residents with access to a range of quality health-care services. Other innovative approaches to addressing the shortage of health-care workers include medical schools that provide physician consulting expertise and support to rural hospitals and physicians, multi-disciplinary Family Health Teams and satellite health-care sites.

INCREASING ACCESS TO HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

Below are some ideas for increasing access to health-care services. Do you see other ways of meeting rural health-care needs?

- Supporting community partnerships to renovate or provide equipment for local health-care facilities to attract doctors and other health-care professionals.
- Developing long-term strategies to better inform young people of the viable, well-paying and challenging jobs in the health-care sector.
- Putting more resources into community and home-care services to enable hospitals to focus on those with acute needs.
- Supporting communities in developing comprehensive long-term plans to integrate all aspects of health-care needs and services.
- Developing innovative community-based approaches to address the shortage of medical professionals (e.g. upgrading skills of local nursing professionals to the nurse practitioner level, and using information technology to modernize health-care service delivery and help achieve health-system integration).

The Ontario government's Free Tuition Program offers final-year medical students, residents and recently graduated physicians up to \$40,000 (or \$10,000 per year) in exchange for a return-of-service commitment of three or four years in an eligible community. Approved communities include those identified as underserved for family physicians or specialists.

EDUCATION

In addition to their educational programs, schools are integral to the fabric of rural communities; in some communities the school may be the only public institution. Schools help shape community identity and contribute to a high quality of life. A local school can attract young families to live, work and raise their children in that community.

Declining populations in many rural communities coupled with lower birth rates have put pressure on school boards to consolidate elementary schools and reduce courses offered in secondary schools. As a result of consolidated schools, some students must travel greater distances to school – public transportation is often not a viable alternative to student transportation. This heightens the importance of providing adequate funding for student transportation.

Post-secondary institutions also contribute to a high quality of life and to rural economic development. They offer local young people an opportunity to be educated near home while providing employers with educational services. They also open up innovative opportunities through research and development. For example, the Northern Ontario Medical School will have a strong research focus and will encourage young people to remain or relocate in Northern Ontario. It will also stimulate future economic opportunities in many northern communities.

MAINTAINING ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION CLOSE TO HOME

Maintaining access to quality education requires a variety of approaches. What other ideas might help rural communities such as yours reach this goal?

- Expanding the availability of courses through distance education over the Internet to better meet the variety of student interests and aspirations.
- Examining options for more integrated educational and employment opportunities within rural communities (e.g. helping employers create more co-operative education opportunities and apprenticeship programs; having existing educational institutions or employment agencies administer more training, volunteer and summer student programs).
- Establishing partnerships among the public sector and other sectors to expand the use of school facilities during non-school hours.
- Adjusting school closure guidelines, and student and transportation funding formulas to reflect realities of school boards with low-density student populations – providing quality education closer to home.

COMMUNITY WELL-BEING AND SAFETY

Community well-being involves a community's capacity to train and sustain leaders and local champions, to develop non-profit and voluntary organizations, and to encourage philanthropic donations. It also means supporting community recreation, culture and heritage activities and facilities, and fostering a sense of safety and security.

Municipalities and communities rely on volunteers to deliver a large number of community and social services. Rural Ontario, however, has a smaller pool of skilled leaders and volunteers than urban areas. Rural communities often lack the resources and facilities for the recruitment, training, education, management and recognition of volunteers. There are few resources allocated to promote philanthropy in rural areas. The existence of community foundations can stimulate rural philanthropy to help communities address local social, economic and environmental needs.

The rich culture and heritage of rural communities foster a sense of connection for those who live there. They also attract new residents and tourists, create economic development opportunities and provide for a healthier social climate.

Safety and security are also important to community well-being. All communities deal with safety issues. According to the Ontario Provincial Police, rural communities face unique challenges including theft of crops, timber, livestock, and expensive farm and recreational equipment. Some of the more prevalent offences affecting rural Ontario are break and enters and thefts, drug-grow operations and trespassing. Further, the increasing number of rural seniors and their affluence may make this demographic group more susceptible to becoming victims of crime.

The Guelph Community Foundation builds permanent, income-earning endowment funds from the charitable gifts of donors, makes grants from the annual income earned to support local initiatives that benefit the citizens of Guelph and area, and provides leadership to the community by bringing people together to identify and address local issues.

The Foundation has funds set up for several purposes including the Community Fund, Scholarship Funds, Administrative Fund, Children and Youth in Recreation Fund, and others established by individual donors and charitable organizations. Funds can be set up to meet the specific needs in the community and to match the philanthropic goals of donors.

In 2002, the Foundation's revenue from donations was over \$350,000 - more than double the revenue received from donations in 2001.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY WELL-BEING AND SAFETY

What are your views on how to strengthen community well-being? How well do existing programs and services work in your community? Are there other approaches you could suggest?

- Supporting the formation and operation of community foundations to allow citizens to invest in local initiatives that address social, economic and environmental needs.
- Developing community cultural plans that demonstrate the linkages between culture, economic development, community capacity and community revitalization.
- Assisting communities to build local leadership skills by training current and future leaders, including young people.
- Encouraging the private and public sectors to contribute their time, leadership and financial support to the voluntary sector.
- Supporting volunteer centres and volunteer organizations with the resources to recruit, train and manage volunteers.
- Developing the knowledge and skills of rural communities to undertake proactive crime prevention (e.g. establishing local crime prevention councils, addressing safety issues for seniors).
- Increasing awareness of the role of victim support services to help community members deal with the trauma of property and violent crime.
- Developing co-ordinated, comprehensive strategies to prevent, investigate and resolve property crimes.

THEME: A CLEAN AND HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Rural areas are home to many natural amenities: expansive forests, diverse ecosystems and prime agricultural land, as well as meadows, moraines, lakes, rivers, and groundwater sources. Protecting the natural environment is important for long-term environmental sustainability, public health and safety, and economic prosperity. Clean water, fresh air and attractive landscapes contribute to the quality of life in rural communities. These rich natural assets also provide jobs for rural residents through tourism, recreation, agriculture and resource-based industries.

The member municipalities of Grey County wanted to determine the best alternative to land application of untreated septage. The method chosen had to be cost-effective, and socially and environmentally acceptable. Nine Grey County municipalities partnered with the province on a pilot Septage Management Plan.

A Septage Task Force Committee was formed to prepare the plan. They were assisted by a Technical Committee which included representatives from the Grey Bruce Health Unit, local Conservation Authorities, the Ministry of the Environment, septage haulers, municipal sewage disposal plant operators and representatives from municipalities that employ septic inspectors.

The final report was completed in March 2004.

GOALS

Strong rural communities will:

- have clean and healthy natural environments that support public health and safety, economic activity and quality of life;
- have the capacity to make planning decisions that balance the health of ecosystems, social well-being and sustainable economic activity; and,
- protect their natural features and use natural resources sustainably.

WATER QUALITY AND QUANTITY

An adequate supply of safe and clean drinking water is essential for strong, thriving and prosperous communities. This irreplaceable resource is threatened by population growth, scattered development, industrial and commercial uses and pollution. These activities negatively impact groundwater recharge areas. Protecting the quality and quantity of our water sources protects public safety and has long-term economic and environmental benefits.

Following up on recommendations from the O'Connor Report, the Ontario government has recently enacted new water legislation and standards. In addition, the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) completed a consultation on their White Paper on *Watershed-based Source Protection Planning* in early 2004. Water protection will also be a component of the growth management and land-use planning review currently underway. Rural municipalities and other rural stakeholders face the added responsibility of dealing with organic nutrients. *The Nutrient Management Act* has established new standards for managing land-applied materials containing nutrients. Many of Ontario's water sources are in rural areas, and rural communities bear much of the responsibility to protect both municipal and private water systems. Meeting the new water protection standards, however, is challenging for some rural municipalities and stakeholders.

PROTECTING WATER QUALITY AND QUANTITY

The following are a list of opportunities for protecting water quality and quantity. Can you think of others?

- Providing information, cost-effective tools and innovative approaches for water conservation and protection of natural assets;
- Facilitating meetings and workshops to share information about government legislation and regulations, and helping communities develop solutions to local environmental issues; and,
- Encouraging communities to consider developing partnerships to capitalize on economies of scale (e.g. regional water systems), access to professional and technical expertise and share best practices.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

Communities across Ontario face challenges in dealing with their waste, which is made more difficult as the province's population continues to grow. Despite continued emphasis on the 3Rs (reduce, reuse and recycle) landfills are reaching capacity.

Changes in regulations regarding the management of untreated septage and biosolids are also under development. Dealing with these requirements may be difficult for many rural communities as sewage treatment facilities and capacity are limited, as is capital for new or upgraded infrastructure. Other pressures include increased costs to pump out septic and holding tanks due to higher transportation and disposal fees.

The province of Ontario has developed a 60 per cent waste diversion strategy to better manage waste and reduce the province's reliance on landfills. A discussion paper produced by the Ministry of Environment will soon be released on options for achieving this goal. Some topics include considering new and emerging waste management technologies and undertaking public education and awareness activities to promote the 3Rs.

MANAGING WASTE

The following are some examples of possible future directions for managing waste. Would these be effective solutions in your community? Can you think of other ideas?

- Exploring regional collaboration and partnerships on waste management plans and technologies, including septage management.
- Developing demonstration sites, pilot projects and case studies that support alternative waste management.
- Working with communities to examine options to meet the provincial government's target of 60 per cent waste diversion in a cost-efficient manner (e.g. partnerships, technology, user-pay programs).
- Promoting the sharing of best practices among municipalities (e.g. through the website of the Ontario Centre for Municipal Best Practices).
- Engaging the private sector in developing new technologies, and investing in and upgrading sewage treatment facilities.

AIR QUALITY

Climate change, smog and air quality are both rural and urban issues. The Kyoto Protocol, the escalating numbers of smog days, the use of coal-fired plants to generate electricity and the health effects of poor air quality have heightened the awareness and concern about air quality in Ontario.

This has resulted in new limits on air pollutants and reduced emission standards. The Ontario government has restated its promise to phase out coal-fired power plants and set targets for conservation and the use of renewable energy sources, such as ethanol, bio-diesel, and wind energy.

Fact sheets are available on how municipalities can encourage wind energy development in their area and explore the potential of such innovative economic development opportunities (www.mah.gov.on.ca).

Alternative energy production decreases greenhouse gases and smog, and may open up new economic opportunities for rural communities.

Dealing with climate change could have a significant impact on rural communities, and agriculture in particular. Agricultural production is a major source of nitrous oxide and methane emissions but can also serve as a potential “sink” for absorbing carbon dioxide. Measures to curb these emissions will have economic consequences for the agriculture sector and rural economies. However, the agricultural sector is examining new technologies to use methane emissions as a source of energy.

The Bruce Wind Turbine, located near Kincardine in Bruce County, has been in operation since 1995. The 50-metre tall, 600 kilowatt wind turbine has produced approximately 1,200 megawatt – hours of electricity each year – enough to supply roughly 100 homes. It also has the potential to offset roughly 1,200 tonnes of carbon dioxide and acid gas emissions annually.

IMPROVING AIR QUALITY

Consider ways that air quality could be improved in your community. The following represent ongoing and potential opportunities.

- Supporting the development and promotion of alternative energy production (e.g. ethanol, bio-diesel, wind energy) taking into consideration the protection of other resources such as farmland.
- Promoting the use of multi-purpose trails for biking and walking, and the use of public transit (where available) to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.
- Developing resources such as handbooks that describe innovative approaches and tools that communities nationally and internationally are using to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air-borne pollutants.

NATURAL FEATURES AND LANDSCAPES

A healthy environment is important for all of Ontario. A healthy rural environment means balancing economic opportunities (including tourism), development interests and recreational uses with the protection of water resources, air quality, agricultural lands, wetlands and open spaces, and wildlife.

Urban sprawl puts pressure on resource industries and natural areas in rural communities (e.g. aggregates, agriculture and forestry). The ever-increasing demand to develop new residential, commercial, industrial and recreational land continues to threaten the balance between development needs, and resource protection and environmental stewardship. There are also activities related to resource extraction that occur in specific rural locations. These extraction activities are important to meet market demands and need to be balanced with competing land uses.

The Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) provides policy direction on matters of provincial interest related to land-use planning and development. The PPS recognizes there are complex inter-relationships among environmental, economic and social factors in land-use planning.

Rural-urban demographic changes have heightened concerns on land uses. To plan effectively for growth pressures and competing land uses, initiatives such as the proposed Greenbelt legislation and the proposed Golden Horseshoe Growth Management Plan are currently underway. Consultations on these initiatives are taking place in the spring and summer of 2004 and will help shape the proposed legislation and policies. The Provincial Policy Statement five-year review, which is also underway, will help to clarify provincial land use planning policies and protect matters of provincial interest such as water and other resources. These initiatives will have a significant impact on rural areas.

PROTECTING NATURAL FEATURES AND LANDSCAPES

The province would like to hear your suggestions for ways to protect natural features and landscapes in addition to such current programs and new directions for consideration as are listed below.

- Providing tools and resources to assist communities with community revitalization initiatives (e.g. encouraging the intensification of land use, brownfield and waterfront redevelopment), and good planning through clear land use planning policies (e.g. protection of prime agricultural land).
- Promoting tourism and recreation, and natural heritage (e.g. eco-tourism, agri-tourism), using sustainable practices, as an economic development strategy.
- Supporting volunteer efforts that will protect community biodiversity.

COMPLETING THE PICTURE

We need you to get involved. The ultimate success of the plan for rural Ontario will depend to a great degree on the quality and range of suggestions the province receives from rural residents and stakeholders.

This consultation paper is available online, as is the accompanying workbook. Respondents can detail their opinions and ideas through the website of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing at www.ruralplan.ontario.ca.

Submissions can also be sent by July 30, 2004, by mail or fax to the following address:

The Rural Plan
Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Rural Development Division, 4NW
1 Stone Road West
Guelph, Ontario
N1G 4Y2
Fax: (519) 826-4336

If you have questions or would like further information, please contact us toll-free at 1-888-588-4111 or (519) 837-6313, or e-mail at ruralplan@mah.gov.on.ca.

Our goal is to create a framework that will help Ontario's rural communities, and the people who live and work there, achieve new level of prosperity and quality of life for years to come. Now is your chance to help shape Ontario's Rural Plan.