



Essex County Counts: Position Papers

Essex County's Six Provincial Election Priorities

1.0 Windsor-Essex Hospitals System

Significant support from the Province has allowed the Windsor-Essex Hospitals System to move into Phase 2, a crucial step toward replacing our cramped, aging facilities with a modern, state-of-the-art hospitals system the residents of Windsor-Essex deserve. We need continued support to ensure this transformational project gets completed and redefines health care in this region for decades to come.

The County of Essex is certainly doing its part. Our 2022 Budget added another \$6.36 million to the County's reserve for a new hospital, bringing the total to \$31 million of what is building to be a \$100 million commitment.

Windsor Regional Hospital is also doing its part to push this project ahead. They have named a new Project Management Team headed by Paul Landry and they have established a Project Vision and set of Design Principles following a survey that received 978 submissions from the residents of Windsor-Essex.

With the continued support of the provincial government, this project promises to be transformational for Windsor-Essex.

It will generate more than 14,000 jobs over its lifetime, generating employee compensation exceeding \$1 Billion and taxes in excess of more than \$200 million, including more than \$68 million for municipal governments across this region.

It will attract to Windsor-Essex the best and brightest in the world of medicine and health care and it will attract more people and more families, fueling increased residential and commercial development across the region.

2.0 Infrastructure

Municipalities are responsible for the roads, sewers, water and wastewater services and other vital infrastructure that keeps Ontario running but local

taxpayers cannot be expected by themselves to address a massive and growing infrastructure deficit.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario estimates local municipalities own and operate infrastructure worth nearly half a trillion dollars. The costs to maintain and ultimately replace those assets are so daunting as to be insurmountable without consistent and substantial provincial assistance.

Local municipalities would have to increase property taxes by 8.35 per cent a year for the next 10 years to address the \$60-billion dollar infrastructure deficit. There needs to be considerably less reliance on the property tax base as a revenue source for municipalities, particularly when it comes to capital infrastructure.

Ontario municipalities have been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and are reckoning with increased costs when it comes to delivering public health services including long-term care and ambulance services. There have also been increased costs to implementing health and safety protocols in the workplace while municipalities at the same time are experiencing lost revenue from property tax deferrals.

While our local municipalities appreciated the recent boost your government provided to the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund and the funding you provide through the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund, it is not nearly enough to address the ballooning infrastructure deficit and the needs of our residents.

As well, it is difficult for municipalities to properly address asset management planning when the funding envelope can change from year to year and government to government.

Municipalities require a steady and reliable source of funding to best serve the interests of their residents. Existing cost-sharing programs should also be maintained at a stable level.

3.0 Affordable Housing

The need for affordable housing in Essex County is urgent and grows more pressing every day. Not only does Essex County need to construct additional affordable housing units, it needs to refurbish our rapidly deteriorating supply of aging housing stock. The wait list for affordable housing in our region is at more than 5,000 and growing. The demand is there. We need the supply.

The County has invested \$5.1 million over the last three Budgets as part of a five-year capital plan to address our aging housing stock, but significantly more funding is required on an ongoing basis. The affordable housing crisis is a national one affecting every corner of Ontario. It requires a concerted and creative

response from the federal and provincial governments working in partnership with municipalities and the private and non-profit sectors.

Addressing the affordable housing and homelessness crisis requires more than just an infusion of capital dollars, it requires an increase in operating funds to the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative and other mental health and addictions services programs. A recent survey found that 63 per cent of those experiencing homelessness locally had mental health issues.

Municipal councils are on the front lines when it comes to mental health and addictions issues but cannot address the problem in isolation. A comprehensive and integrated provincial response is required in terms of services, supports, prevention and equitable access.

Municipalities need consistent and substantial provincial funding to continue delivering a broad array of health and human services, including public health, childcare, social assistance, paramedic services, long-term care, social housing and programs combatting homelessness.

4.0 Broadband

Even in Southwestern Ontario, one of Canada's more densely populated areas, there are communities, homes and businesses without reliable internet access. Year after year, kilometres of fibre-optic cables are being laid to close the gaps. The provincial government has been a solid partner in the expansion of broadband in southwestern Ontario but we need to move faster to ensure our residents and rural businesses have the competitive edge they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world.

The pandemic has shown us that a high-speed internet connection is an essential service, whether for work or school or receiving health care. We rely on the internet for an increasing number of daily activities. Rural communities can't be left behind. The internet can help put our residents and businesses on an equal footing with those in large urban areas. We need continued provincial investments to ensure every resident in Essex County has access to fast and reliable high-speed internet, from the farm field to the factory floor

5.0 Climate Change

The County of Essex declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and followed that up in May of 2021 with an ambitious Regional Energy Plan in partnership with all seven of our local municipalities and our local conservation authority.

The plan was developed over an accelerated timeline of 18 months by a task force, comprised of a broad cross-section of community and industry stakeholders, that only held virtual meetings.

Work on the plan was funded through provincial grant money but we will also need financial support from the Province to achieve the plan's laudable goals, which include an increase in community-wide energy efficiency of at least 50 per cent by 2041 over 2019 levels and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of at least 60 per cent by 2041 over 2019 levels.

Essex County is surrounded on three sides by water and our residents are experiencing first-hand the effects of climate change in the form of flooding, shoreline erosion and the increased frequency of severe weather events.

The challenges of a warming climate bring opportunities in the form of new jobs, increased energy efficiency and the repatriation of energy dollars that flow out west. The County of Essex can only capitalize on these transformational economic opportunities with financial support from a meaningful partnership with the Province.

6.0 Municipal Liability and Insurance Costs

The skyrocketing cost of municipal insurance has continued unabated during the pandemic, with many municipalities reporting increases greater than 20 per cent. This increase is being borne by the property tax base and it is unsustainable. It is diverting precious resources away from other priorities, like providing top notch services and programs to residents, solid asset management planning and staff training and development.

While these increasing costs are being fueled by multiple factors, the primary issue is Ontario's joint and several liability regime, which makes municipal governments the insurers of last resort in instances where they are not primarily responsible for an incident. This system is unfair to property taxpayers who have to pay substantial damages even when a municipality is found at minimal fault.

Potential solutions to rising insurance costs that could be explored include a provincial fund that could limit municipal exposure and the pooling of insurance amongst municipalities to lower costs. Reforming the joint and several liability regime alone could save the municipal sector \$27 million in insurance costs and that money could be directed to projects and priorities that improve the everyday lives of residents.