



Administrative Report

To: Warden MacDonald and Members of Essex County Council

From: Donald McArthur, Manager, Communications and Organizational Development

Date: Wednesday, November 5, 2025

Subject: County of Essex Advocacy Strategy

Report #: 2025-1105-LLS-R56-DM

Purpose

The purpose of this Administrative Report (the "**Report**") is to assist County Council and Administration in developing and executing an annual, coordinated advocacy strategy, to advance the County's priorities and common goals the County shares with its local municipal partners as set out in the County of Essex Strategic Plan (2024-2027) (the "**Strategic Plan**").

Background

"Strong advocacy" through the forging of "meaningful partnerships" is central to the Mission provided for in the Strategic Plan, with the goal being to "deliver fair and valuable regional programs and services for our communities." Further, strategic pillars contained in the Strategic Plan emphasize "advocating for Essex County's fair share" and "driving shared priorities with Local Municipal Partners."

To do this, the Strategic Plan says the County will:

"Develop and execute a coordinated advocacy strategy to advance common priorities with Local Municipal Partners."

The elements of an effective advocacy strategy include research and issue identification, the setting of clear objectives, Council and community engagement, audience and partner mapping, the development of key messages, ongoing engagement and relationship building, collaboration and coalition building, seizing specific advocacy opportunities, and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of advocacy campaigns and tactics. These concepts will be explored in greater detail in the discussion section of this Report.

The County's advocacy efforts are relatively recent and to date have been focused on provincial and federal election campaigns and leveraging opportunities to delegate before various provincial ministries at conferences, including the Association of Municipalities of Ontario ("**AMO**") conference and the Rural Ontario Municipal Association ("**ROMA**") conference.

Currently, there is no formalized process for Council to discuss and vote on advocacy priorities and there is no dedicated government relations function attached to any County administrative position or department. A Service Delivery Review conducted in 2024 of the recently renamed Legislative and Legal Services division recommended establishing Government Relations as a formal function within the Communications and Organizational Development Division ("**Communications**").

Under the current process, the CAO's office, in consultation with the Warden and the Senior Leadership Team, assesses priorities, the Strategic Plan, anticipated service delivery challenges, and previous Council discussions and directions to identify issues that warrant advocacy at the AMO or ROMA conferences. A similar process is utilized for advocacy during provincial and federal elections. For the most recent elections, Council input was sought in public session to determine election priorities.

For the AMO and ROMA conferences, the CAO's Office applies to delegate before specific ministries on the identified priorities. Once delegation meetings have been confirmed, the CAO's Office works with the Warden, Communications, and subject matter experts to craft written and verbal presentations to advance the identified priorities at those delegation meetings.

The CAO provides a summary via email to County Council shortly before the delegation meetings are held, outlining the issues that are to be discussed. Following the delegation meetings, the CAO writes a report for the next Council meeting, to provide a summary of the outcome of those delegation meetings. Further, following the delegation meetings being held, Communications shares the materials used at the delegation meetings on the County's website and shares them through the County's social media accounts.

The process outlined above has developed informally and relatively recently. During the 2021 and 2025 federal elections and the 2022 and 2025 provincial elections, the County issued news releases and video statements by the Warden setting out the County's priorities and asking candidates to address them. These priorities and the cases supporting them were posted on the County's website and shared via the County's social media accounts. It should be noted that it appears that multiple municipalities in Ontario

have adopted a similar approach, so the County's process is not unique or unusual.

Essex County Counts

The Essex County Counts campaign has focused on the following provincial and federal issues:

Provincial:

2022	2025
Infrastructure Funding	Infrastructure Funding
High Speed Internet	Social and Prosperity Review
Affordable Housing	Housing and Social Supports
New Hospital	New Hospital
Municipal Insurance Costs	Threat of U.S. Tariffs
Climate Change	

Federal:

2021	2025
Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure	The Tariff Threat
Strategic Business Investments	Affordable Housing
Universal Access to High-Speed Internet	Strategic Investments and Infrastructure Funding
Affordable Housing	Support for the Great Lakes and Clean Drinking Water

The County in recent years has also delegated before multiple provincial ministries about various issues at the AMO and ROMA conferences, including those outlined below.

Association of Municipalities of Ontario

2025

- Funding for a grade-separated interchange at County Road 22 and County Road 19/Manning Road

2024

- Infrastructure funding for County Road 22 intersection improvements

- Joint delegation with Amherstburg seeking health care improvements
- Operational changes to the Central Ambulance Communications Centre

2023

- Increased Funding for Primary and Urgent Care Clinics with Expanded Hours
- Increased Funding for Physician Recruitment
- Placing A Patient Navigator in the Central Ambulance Communications Centre

Rural Ontario Municipal Association

2025

- Infrastructure funding for County Road 22 intersection improvements
- Operational changes to the Central Ambulance Communications Centre
- Joint delegation with Tecumseh seeking Housing Infrastructure funding

2024

- Municipal concerns with recycling program changes
- Enhanced infrastructure funding in the County Road 22 corridor
- Enhanced support for team-based models of health care

While lessons were learned and experience gained during the process of preparing delegation materials and advocating at conferences, it is difficult to assess whether these advocacy efforts were successful. Specific items or changes sought by the County were not all actualized by the province, but seeds may have been planted that might one day bear fruit. Successful advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint. Ongoing advocacy and continually assessing priorities and the effectiveness of tactics and specific campaigns will be critical for success.

Discussion

The County has grown significantly over the past 30 years and, as the upper-tier municipality, is increasingly the voice for local municipalities on common regional, provincial, and federal issues. The Warden and members of council represent all residents of the County on various boards and committees, as well as at meetings with other levels of government, on ad hoc committees and task forces, and at numerous events throughout the year.

Municipal governments across the province are becoming increasingly strategic in their advocacy efforts and the County should be no exception. Coordinated, clear, and consistent communication by the County and its local municipal partners on priority issues will maximize the opportunities for successful responses to the issues raised, and will demonstrate to residents that their interests are being well represented.

The County's Strategic Plan recognizes the importance of regional advocacy and the necessity that the County, as the upper-tier government, take the lead. It calls for the County to be a **"regional champion"** advancing regional interests through **"meaningful partnerships, strong advocacy, and informed decision-making."** It calls for the County to "be an essential team player in driving shared priorities with Local Municipal partners" and to advocate **"for Essex County's Fair Share."** Under the **"Building a Regional Powerhouse"** strategic pillar, the plan says the County **"will help create the conditions to make the region a powerhouse in public and private investment attraction."**

The advocacy experience gained by the County in recent years has highlighted the need for a more systematic and targeted approach to seeking solutions for ongoing issues that affect the region, an approach that necessarily requires the considered input and clear direction of County Council.

Effective advocacy requires coordinated efforts over a sustained period of time. Successful advocacy requires cultivating relationships with decision-makers, leveraging interests shared with local municipal partners, seizing lobbying opportunities at provincial and federal conferences, passing and promoting Council resolutions, and developing compelling messaging that can be shared on social media and with the residents of the County.

Different than ongoing engagement activities related to issues like health promotion via EMS social media channels and road construction updates that are more specifically addressed in a stakeholder engagement strategy, an effective advocacy strategy will be dependent upon Council identifying the specific issues it wants Administration to advocate for and direct its finite resources toward.

By discussing these issues in public session and voting to establish regional advocacy priorities, Council will provide Administration the unambiguous direction it needs to proceed. Clear Council direction will additionally provide advocacy campaigns with democratic legitimacy, public exposure, and momentum.

"Clear alignment and understanding among Council and staff regarding the County's vision and priorities will help Council

and leadership effectively guide the organization through key decisions, such as how to best plan for growth and what the role of the County should be for the broader region,” says the County’s Strategic Plan.

Achieving consensus on regional priorities at the Council table will not be an easy undertaking given councillors come from seven distinct municipalities, each with their own challenges, opportunities, priorities and concerns. That is precisely why a public discussion and formal ranking of regional advocacy priorities is so important and how these discussions will provide advocacy campaigns with political momentum and capital.

Empowering the County to speak with a unified voice on matters of regional interest lays the foundation for effective advocacy. The County is but one voice on social media. That voice can easily be amplified through the social media channels of the Mayors and Deputy Mayors of the County’s local municipalities, and it can be amplified yet again by the social media channels of the local municipalities themselves, reaching hundreds of thousands of voters in addition to local MPs, MPPs, Cabinet Ministers, and the media.

The Strategy

(Proposed `Corporate Policy 2025-016 County of Essex Advocacy Strategy Policy’ (the “Policy”) is attached to this report as Appendix A)

The purpose of an annual advocacy strategy is to provide focus and intent for the County’s efforts in pursuing its priorities. This does not preclude advocating for the County’s interests on other matters that arise during the year or supporting the efforts of local municipalities to advance specific interests. Rather, the strategy should provide a framework and template for directing the County’s advocacy efforts – both over the year ahead and the longer term.

The County’s proposed advocacy strategy is based on seven pillars:

- 1) Issue Identification
- 2) Council Discussion and Prioritization
- 3) Audience and Partner Mapping
- 4) Key Message Development
- 5) Engagement and Relationship Building
- 6) Communication and Ongoing Advocacy
- 7) Monitoring and Evaluation

Issue Identification

The CAO will work with the CAOs of the local municipalities to identify issues of common concern and then work with the Warden and County Administration, considering the Strategic Plan, anticipated service delivery challenges and previous Council discussions and resolutions, to draft a list of potential advocacy priorities for Council to discuss, debate, and decide upon.

The recent priorities listed above provide an excellent starting point for this exercise as does assessing the priorities put forth by groups like AMO and the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus ("**WOWC**"). For 2025 to 2027, for example, the WOWC has set the following advocacy priorities:

- Infrastructure Development and Funding
- Housing Affordability and Availability
- Workforce Development and Preservation
- Mental Health Services and Support

Ideally, the County's advocacy strategy would consist of two to six priorities. Setting a larger number of priorities must be weighed against the resources required to advocate effectively and the potential of undermining the effectiveness of individual priorities by asking for too much. If everything is a priority, nothing is.

Below are some factors that should be considered when providing advocacy recommendations for Council consideration:

- 1) Is the issue Essex County specific?
- 2) Are other organizations involved? Does the County have partners with the same priority?
- 3) Does the solution being sought have a County-wide benefit?
- 4) Does it align the County's strategic goals and direction, as set by Council?
- 5) Has there been a previous or ongoing effort on this issue?
- 6) Does this issue align with a provincial/federal policy or direction?
- 7) How urgent is the need for a solution?

What the County is doing to address the issue and what assistance it is seeking from partners should be spelled out for each priority. Council and Administration can best identify or confirm these priorities during the budget development process, which traditionally begins in August.

This approach ensures the allocation of County resources aligns with its advocacy priorities. For example, if the intent is to advocate for more funding for infrastructure expansion, an increased annual investment in road expansion would illustrate the County's commitment to addressing the issue. Synchronizing the setting of advocacy priorities with the budget also enables County Council and Administration to launch their efforts early in the following budget year.

Council Discussion and Prioritization

As discussed earlier, Council support and direction is the backbone of any effective advocacy strategy. By establishing priorities through a public discussion and vote, the Warden and Administration will be empowered to speak on behalf of the County on specific matters of regional importance. It will allow the County to speak with a unified voice, providing the advocacy strategy with democratic legitimacy and momentum.

Once the priorities have been set, key messaging can be developed and shared on the County's website and social media channels throughout the year. Having the Mayors and Deputy Mayors of the local municipalities support these priorities in their role as County Councillors opens the door to local municipalities amplifying these priorities in their constituent communities, as well as on their social media channels and the channels of their respective municipalities.

Audience and Partner Mapping

The CAO's office will work with subject matter experts and Communications to identify potential advocacy partners and audience segments. Who or what agencies can be enlisted to support a particular campaign? What ministries and what level of government has carriage of specific files? Does the voting public have an interest in the resolution of a particular priority? What demographic groups or organizations is the target government most concerned with? While MPs and MPPs and federal and provincial civil servants are one target audience, the businesses and residents of the County might well be another. MPPs and MPs ultimately answer to the people, and voters aligned with the County's priorities can be partners in regional prosperity. One recent example of galvanizing the community and leveraging local political clout was the #WECantWait social media campaign for the new regional hospital.

Key Message Development

Communications will work with the CAO's office and subject matter experts to lay out the case for each priority with data and information specific to the County. This messaging will then be posted on the County's website and

shared on social media throughout the year. The priorities will be shared with media outlets once they are selected by Council and will be amplified where appropriate throughout the year, in the Warden's Luncheon speech, for example, and coinciding with advocacy opportunities at provincial conferences. Resolutions supported by Council, in line with established priorities, can also be amplified on social media.

Engagement and Relationship Building

Effective advocacy is rooted in ongoing relationships cultivated over time, and should be undertaken throughout the year, not just during election campaigns or provincial conferences. The Warden and CAO already maintain relationship with local CAOs, MPs, MPPs, and other private and public sector leaders. Consideration should be given to formalizing these touch points, such as quarterly meetings with MPs and MPPs. Opportunities to connect should be seized, advising decision makers in writing of Council resolutions or offering congratulations on appointments or accomplishments. County Council has extended an open invitation for MPs and MPPs to address Council and a formal invitation could be sent for annual or semi-annual appearances.

Currently, there is no government relations function attached to any administrative position or department. Consideration should be given by Council to formalizing the government relations function in County operations.

Communication and Ongoing Advocacy

Advocacy strategies have the best chance of realizing success if they are sustained and rooted in well-established, positive relationships with the decision makers at the senior levels of government. While it is possible a single resolution of Council or a single meeting with an MP or MPP at a conference could yield tangible results on a particular file, it is highly unlikely. There are 444 Ontario municipalities competing for attention and, just within our region, local MPs and MPPs are dealing with competing requests from 11 municipalities if you count Windsor, Chatham-Kent, and Pelee Island. Building positive relationships and planting seeds that might not bear fruit for some time are crucial for effective advocacy.

Cases need to be made on County priorities consistently over a sustained period to the local politicians who can influence decision-makers at Queen's Park or on Parliament Hill. Quarterly meetings between the Warden and CAO and our local MPs and MPPs would be an official and effective way to build a positive relationship and keep the lines of communication open. Those communications can be buttressed with friendly and informal interactions at community events and by establishing channels to keep MPs and MPPs informed about our ongoing advocacy efforts.

It is not sufficient for the County to lobby politicians. It's also essential for the County to make the public aware of its advocacy efforts. These engagement efforts align with our Strategic Plan, and they also make sense from a tactical perspective when you consider that the residents of Essex County vote for local MPs and MPPs. If the County can make its case to the people to support a particular project or priority, the people, in turn, can make their opinions known to decision makers. Democratic governments are creatures of the people, after all, and re-election is contingent on maintaining the support of voters.

Communications will create a dedicated advocacy page on the County's website, with links to all the presentations that have been made at recent provincial conferences and the advocacy papers that have been put out during recent elections. Future materials presented at the AMO, ROMA, and other conferences will be added once those presentations are made. Links to this page and these presentations will always be available for public consumption and links to the page and to the position papers will be shared on social media.

Tactics Checklist:

- Regular meetings with MPs and MPPs to build relationships
- Website posts and news releases at milestone moments
- Advocate at AMO, ROMA, and other appropriate conferences
- Post advocacy materials online and add to social media rotation
- Provide advocacy materials to local municipal partners for inclusion on agendas
- Amplify, on social media, Council resolutions that align with identified Council priorities
- Encourage members of Council and local municipalities to share advocacy posts on their own social media channels

Monitoring and Evaluation

The CAO and Warden will bring back feedback from provincial conferences and work with staff to assess what worked, what did not work, and what could be refined and improved. Communications can track data associated with page views and social media reach in connection with particular advocacy campaigns and recommend adjustments to the outreach strategy accordingly. The CAO will take in the lessons learned from each campaign and will make recommendations for improvements in the annual report to Council on establishing advocacy priorities.

Annual Advocacy Calendar

A proposed 2026 advocacy strategy calendar is provided below, and includes the following:

September through December 2025:

- Polling of local municipal CAOs to identify shared priorities.
- Administration prepares Council report on potential advocacy priorities.
- Council discusses priorities in public session and votes on them.
- Council passes Budget in line with established priorities.

January 2026:

- The Warden meets with local MPPs and MPs to share the county's 2026 advocacy priorities.
- News release posted and shared on social media setting out the County's priority issues for 2026.
- Meetings with provincial officials and informal promotion of the advocacy priorities at the ROMA Conference.
- The Warden shares the County's advocacy priorities with WOWC.

February 2026:

- Report to Council and news release on advocacy efforts at ROMA and a summary during the Warden's opening remarks to Council.
- Follow-up meetings with key partners and provincial officials on advocacy issues highlighted at ROMA.
- Refinement of the advocacy strategy as required.

March 2026:

- Highlighting of the County's advocacy priorities at the annual Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce Warden's Luncheon.

April 2026:

- Release of the Warden's message about the County's priorities for 2026. This could be shared in various formats, including as a news release and video to be shared on social media channels.

May 2026:

- Sharing of the County's priorities at the Ontario Small Urban Municipalities ("**OSUM**") annual conference.

Summer 2026:

- Preparation of delegation materials for the AMO conference.
- Meetings with provincial officials and informal promotion of the advocacy priorities at the annual AMO conference.
- Report to Council and news release on advocacy efforts at AMO and a summary during the Warden's opening remarks.
- Follow-up meetings with key partners and provincial officials on advocacy issues highlighted at AMO.
- Administration reviews the response to advocacy efforts and follows up with relevant partners.

September to December 2026

- Polling of local municipal CAOs to identify shared priorities for 2027.
- Administration prepares Council report on potential advocacy priorities for 2027.
- Council discusses priorities in a public meeting and votes on them.
- Council passes Budget in line with established priorities for 2027.

Financial Implications

The cost will depend on the methods employed to promote the County's position, but the tactics outlined in this report can be undertaken by staff within the current budget.

Consultations

During the preparation of this Report and the proposed 2026 County of Essex Advocacy Strategy contained within this Report, the following consultations were sought:

- Sandra Zwiers, CAO
- David Sundin, Director, Legislative and Legal Services/County Solicitor

Strategic Plan Alignment

Working as Team Essex County	Growing as Leaders in Public Service Excellence	Building a Regional Powerhouse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☒ Scaling Sustainable Services through Innovation ☒ Focusing “Team Essex County” for Results ☒ Advocating for Essex County’s Fair Share 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☒ Being an Employer with Impact ☒ A Government Working for the People ☒ Promoting Transparency and Awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☒ Providing Reliable Infrastructure for Partners ☒ Supporting Dynamic and Thriving Communities Across the County ☒ Harmonizing Action for Growth ☒ Advancing Truth and Reconciliation

Recommendation

That Essex County Council receive Report Number 2025-1105-LLS-R56-DM, County of Essex Advocacy Strategy, as information; and,

That the proposed Corporate Policy 2025-016 County of Essex Advocacy Strategy Policy, attached to this report as Appendix A, be adopted in conjunction with By-law 2025-45 at the appropriate time; and,

That Administration be directed to provide a Report to Council on potential 2026 advocacy priorities to coincide with the 2026 Budget deliberations.

Approvals

Respectfully Submitted,

Don McArthur

Donald McArthur, Manager, Communications and Organizational Development

Concurred With,

David Sundin

David Sundin, BA (Hons), LL.B., Director, Legislative and Legal Services/County Solicitor

Concurred With,

Sandra Zwiers

Sandra Zwiers, MAcc, CPA, CA, Chief Administrative Officer

Appendix	Title
A	Proposed Corporate Policy 2025-016 County of Essex Advocacy Strategy Policy
B	Essex County Counts advocacy during the 2021 federal election: https://www.countyofessex.ca/en/news/essex-county-counts-our-message-to-federal-candidates.aspx
C	Essex County Counts advocacy during the 2022 provincial election: https://www.countyofessex.ca/en/news/essex-county-counts-during-the-provincial-election-campaign.aspx
D	AMO 2023 convention advocacy: https://www.countyofessex.ca/en/news/county-delegation-meets-with-minister-of-health-at-amc-conference.aspx
E	ROMA 2024 convention advocacy: https://www.countyofessex.ca/en/news/county-of-essex-advances-regional-interests-at-roma-conference.aspx