

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Good morning, and thank you so much to Jeyan for that warm introduction. Let me also acknowledge and welcome our Ontario Liberal MPPs who are here today.

I think it's particularly fitting to join the Rural Ontario Municipal Association for my first major speech as Ontario Liberal Party leader for two reasons:

The first, because of course I also served over a decade in municipal leadership, as a mayor and councillor for the great City of Mississauga.

And second, because as Ontario Liberal leader a central focus and goal of my leadership must be to build a new, improved relationship between our party and our rural communities.

I hope today will mark a good start towards that goal.

I want to speak this morning about values, particularly the value of a handshake. I want to speak with you about

collaboration. And I want to speak with you about respect.
Three simple ideas.

Let's start with a handshake.

As municipal leaders, we shake many hands.

At New Year Levées. Knocking on doors. At the Sobeys' checkout line.

In rural and small-town Ontario, a handshake means something more than a greeting. It seals an agreement. It's a sign of honour, of collaboration and respect.

You can do a deal on a handshake, looking someone in the eye and deciding to trust them.

As municipal leaders, we're trained, as my mentor Hazel McCallion used to say, to "do our homework".

We read staff reports, we speak with experts, get in touch with trusted voices in the community, and then make a decision.

We make the right decision and we stick to it.

That's the goal every time.

That's leadership. That's how we build trust with our residents. It's how we get things done.

Sadly, this is not the case in Ontario politics today.

Late last year, Premier Ford's latest Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing had a press conference...to walk back yet another decision.

Cynthia Mulligan from City TV summed it up with a good question: "Do you guys think things through before you make decisions?"

It's not too much to ask.

And the people of Ontario deserve better. The communities of Ontario deserve better.

I cannot list all the decisions Ford has gotten...undone.

But here's a few examples municipal leaders are all too familiar with:

Regional governance review.

Public planning reform.

Municipal boundary expansions.

The role and responsibilities of Conservation Authorities.

Protecting prime agricultural land.

“The people have spoken, we will not touch The Greenbelt.”

Development charges.

Sustainable energy infrastructure.

EV-charging stations.

Reducing wait times.

Heritage preservation.

Goodness knows, Ministerial Zoning Orders, MZOs.

Folks, this Ford only drives in reverse.

And the worst part is – it’s no accident.

These are deliberate choices being made by a man who spends ALL of his time to make his donors and rich friends richer,

And loses sight of the real people he’s supposed to be fighting for.

Doug Ford has failed people and he’s failed Ontario businesses and communities.

No one is better off now than they were when he came into office, except a very small group of his wealthy friends.

Promises are made...promises are broken. Decisions are made...decisions are reversed.

As the saying goes, this is no way to run a railroad.

It lacks integrity. It's untrustworthy. You cannot do business with someone who you cannot trust. There's no certainty, there's no reliability.

But more than that, it's not collaborative. It's not respectful.

Queen's Park should not dictate to our towns and regions. It should not be top-down. It should be collaborative and respectful. That's the right way to build lasting progress.

Municipal government is collaborative. It's respectful (most of the time).

We do not always agree, but we work together to find common ground, to carefully manage the public's money, targeting spending to address the greatest needs.

Municipalities do not run deficits.

Municipal councils work together to build roads, to renew old hockey rinks and, yes, to protect local wetlands.

Our small towns are places where we look out for each other. Volunteers stocking shelves at a food bank. Farmers and Conservation Authorities restoring a watercourse together. Neighbours shoveling the snow or carrying chains in the hatchback to help get people out of a snowy ditch.

We don't want the government to do everything, but we do want the government to be there when we need it, to get the basics right, to provide public services we all rely upon.

Ontario is the 17th largest economy in the world. If we were a country, we'd be in the G20. We need to have a provincial government that's trustworthy, that's reliable, that does their homework, that's competent. That's focused on what real people need right now.

We deserve healthcare for our families when we need it — not a crisis of massive wait times, emergency-room closures and increasing private, for-profit medicine.

Under Doug Ford, over 1200 emergency department closures, mostly in rural hospitals, occurred in a single year. That's unacceptable.

We deserve great schools, colleges, skilled-trades training programs and universities so we prepare people to contribute to our economy.

Instead we have cuts to the classroom. Students and educators learning in drafty portables after an hour-long bus ride. Rural school closures and universities that need to make their budgets work on the backs of foreign students.

We deserve roads, bridges, highways, regional bus service, broadband internet and cellular service, community centres, and homes that ordinary people can afford. We deserve a Greenbelt, lakes and rivers, wetlands and farmlands protected for the next generation.

Instead, under Doug Ford, we have crumbling infrastructure, and decisions made to benefit wealthy, insider friends of the Premier rather than to serve real people who want safe roads, jobs close to home and a mortgage that's manageable.

We deserve collaborative and respectful relationships between the province and our municipalities.

Municipal leaders deserve these basic values so that together we can work to deliver for our residents.

You deserve fair funding for infrastructure, reliable funding so that you can plan year over year.

Yesterday, I listened to delegations from rural municipal leaders all across the province.

I heard you loud and clear.

And what I heard was sometimes tough to hear.

There is real anxiety out there:

Some of you told us you've appealed to the province to help you build infrastructure, to meet your financial obligations because your needs are too great for a small community's budget — some of you say you're on the brink of bankruptcy. The situation is truly dire.

Or you've fought for the future of your local hospital, only to see it close.

What did you get from this government? You told me you didn't get empathy. You didn't get compassion. You didn't get assistance. You got contempt. And silence.

Municipal leaders should never feel like their concerns are unheard by their government.

I know something of this firsthand. When I stood up for my residents as Mayor, the Premier said I was 'whining'.

No, fighting for your residents is every municipal leader's job.

Ontario's municipalities need a provincial government that listens to you, that works for you, that works with you.

That's what I want to deliver.

It all comes down to respect.

Here I want to take a particular moment to praise a young mother from small-town Simcoe County, Emily Mic-In-tosh.

Emily leads a nonprofit, and in her spare time, she's taken on an important fight to ensure municipal politics is safe and respectful for everyone, building off of work AMO and ROMA have done over the years.

After a particularly upsetting set of allegations against a nearby Councillor, Emily was shocked to learn that there is

no legal process to remove a councillor from office after serious workplace harassment claims are proven.

My colleague, MPP Stephen Blais, introduced Bill 5, which would have set up exactly such a legal process, creating a system fair to the person accused and to the person making the complaint.

Rather than passing the bill, or even introducing one of their own, the Ford government has simply failed to act.

This is a fundamental thing. We need accountability for those who do the wrong thing. We know politics can be a nasty business, but it doesn't have to be.

So one message I want to share today on the theme of respect is to thank ROMA for your dedicated, thoughtful work on this important issue. Alongside AMO, you've been leading the way since 2021.

I also want to thank Councils from Aurora and Bradford to Woolwich and Quinte West, and every letter of the alphabet in between, who have passed resolutions in support of creating a fair legal process to uphold respectful behaviour by municipal officials.

Respect and collaboration, TRUST and the value of a handshake — these are fundamental values I know we share.

Over the last year, many have asked me why I would want to give up being Mayor of my city. It was truly a job I loved, a huge honour and a great responsibility.

I've made this change because I felt called to serve; to fight for every community in Ontario.

To put the government's focus where it should be – on the needs of real people.

Doug Ford's backroom deals with his rich buddies have pulled his focus from that – and people are worse off today because of it.

I truly believe we deserve better.

I also believe I have the experience and the leadership to offer a better path forward.

To deliver reliable public healthcare...

To deliver good schools, training programs, universities and colleges...

To protect our environment and create jobs...

To invest in our infrastructure and build houses people can afford...

And we're going to do it by building a strong, thoughtful, collaborative team in every riding in the province.

Over the next 2.5 years, I look forward to listening and learning from our rural municipal leaders, at a conference like this and over coffee in your hometowns.

I value your expertise and welcome your ideas.

I look forward to shaking hands today, and building great relationships on a foundation of collaboration and respect.

That's how I'd serve as Premier. That's the approach I believe Ontario deserves.

That's what we can deliver, together.

Thank you so much for having me this morning.