



MEDIA RELEASE

Niagara-on-the-Lake Advocates for Local Priorities at ROMA Conference

For Immediate Release

January 25, 2024

Town Council members and Staff represented Niagara-on-the-Lake at the 2024 Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) Conference in Toronto from Sunday, January 21, to Tuesday, January 23, 2024.

Niagara-on-the-Lake was well represented, attending seven delegations and meeting with six provincial ministries to advocate for local priorities, including irrigation infrastructure, building homes and preserving heritage with Bill 23, modernizing the retail of alcohol, reinstating a local nurse practitioner and recruiting physicians, and addressing the threat of Oak Wilt to our trees.

The following Town representatives participated in the delegation meetings:

- Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa
- Deputy Lord Mayor/Councillor Erwin Wiens
- Councillor Sandra O'Connor
- Councillor Wendy Cheropita
- Interim Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) Bruce Zvaniga
- Strategy & Government Relations Officer Victoria Steele

"ROMA is a fantastic conference for municipalities to have their voice heard about the issues that affect their communities," stated Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa. "Discussing challenges can be difficult, but it is crucial for progress and growth and by acknowledging and addressing these challenges, we can work toward a better future for everyone. Thank you to the Ministers and Parliamentary Assistants for welcoming us and facilitating enlightening delegations."

"It's always fascinating to learn from other rural municipalities and their unique experiences," stated Interim CAO Bruce Zvaniga. "Niagara-on-the-Lake is a one-of-a-kind community, yet we can certainly relate to the challenges other rural municipalities face. ROMA provides a powerful platform for engaging in thoughtful conversations and exchanging ideas to lead us toward great outcomes. Thank you to the many individuals who helped make this year's conference another success."



The following is a high-level summary of topics discussed during the delegations.

Irrigation Systems Strategy & Master Plan - Minister Kinga Surma, Ministry of Infrastructure

The Lord Mayor, Councillors and Staff met with Minister Kinga Surma to seek provincial collaboration to ensure the continued advancement of grant funding through the Canada Infrastructure Bank (CIB), and to recognize irrigation systems as municipal infrastructure eligible for infrastructure funding opportunities. Minister Surma supports irrigation as infrastructure and recognizes the importance of the unique system in Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Town will work with the Ministry to coordinate meetings to review upcoming projects within the 10-year Irrigation Systems Action Plan to determine potential funding opportunities.

Building Homes and Preserving Heritage with Bill 23 - Parliamentary Assistant Matthew Rae, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

The Lord Mayor, Councillors and Staff met with Parliamentary Assistant Matthew Rae to discuss protecting the Town's heritage while also meeting growth targets. Requests to the Minister included permitting municipalities to continue work with local developers within the permitted timelines to increase housing supply while also building vibrant, livable communities. In addition, the Town requested an amendment to the *Planning Act* to integrate a "stop the clock" mechanism to have shared responsibilities between the Town and applicants to submit complete applications. Discussions also took place about prioritizing funding for infrastructure and transit to support higher-density housing. The Minister advised they are reviewing response times from agencies on planning applications to ensure they are addressed at a Provincial level in a timely manner.

Preserving Heritage to Protect our Tourism Economy - Minister Ford, Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism

Town representatives once again met with Minister Ford to make requests to the Province about providing municipalities additional time to designate properties listed on the Municipal Register. Discussions also took place about considering grant opportunities or co-op programs to provide local municipalities with the tools to accomplish Bill 23 and requesting the Province to acknowledge the uniqueness of small municipalities that rely on heritage to drive tourism and fuel the economy. The Ministry advised they were aware of the Registry concerns and actively monitoring the affected communities.

Modernizing the Retail of Alcohol - Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy, Ministry of Finance

Representatives from the Town delegated to Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy to thank the Ministry of Finance for supporting the agriculture community and taking steps to eliminate the 6.1% tax on VQA wines. Niagara-on-the-Lake is the leading producer of



grapes nationally (40%) and provincially (90%) and the leading producer of tender fruit nationally (50%). The Lord Mayor, Councillors and Staff urged the Province to continue making decisions that proactively incentivize using Ontario grapes, champion 100% VQA wines, and consult with stakeholders when modernizing the retail of alcohol, without disadvantaging Ontario farmers.

Local Nurse Practitioner Reinstatement and Physician Recruitment in Niagara-on-the-Lake - Minister Sylvia Jones, Ministry of Health

Town officials attended an important delegation regarding physician recruitment in Niagara-on-the-Lake. First, Niagara-on-the-Lake requested the placement of a nurse practitioner in Town be finalized immediately. In addition, the Town discussed the Province's role of delivering healthcare and the municipality's role of advocating for its residents. Requests were also made for the Province to implement grant programs to be used by local area municipalities to increase recruitment efforts and invest in the Niagara healthcare system to ensure a robust and sustainable future for the well-being of our residents. Minister Jones identified changes to the physician ready assessment process and noted leveraging community assets is key to ensure there is infrastructure for new physicians.

Irrigation Systems Strategy & Master Plan – Minister Thompson, Parliamentary Assistant Jones, Ontario Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Rural Affairs

Town representatives met with Parliamentary Assistant Jones and Minister Thompson, thanking OMAFRA for supporting local farmers and committing to eliminate the 6.1% tax. Additionally, Town Council and Staff sought Provincial collaboration to ensure the continued advancement of grant funding for irrigation systems. Both Minister Thompson and PA Jones have been crucial advocates of the agricultural community and irrigation systems in Niagara-on-the-Lake and strongly support strong, autonomous rural communities. Regional Councillor Albert Witteveen also attended the delegation.

Deputy Lord Mayor Erwin Wiens attended a joint delegation alongside the Towns of Fort Erie, Pelham, and Grimsby and requested from OMAFRA clear direction and tool kits for municipalities to address the threat of Oak Wilt in Niagara.

ROMA is the rural branch of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) that advocates for policies and programs.

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