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**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

IN-11

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

IN-11

**Standing Committee
on the Interior**

Estimates

Ministry of Rural Affairs

Committee business

1st Session
44th Parliament

Wednesday 12 November 2025

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des affaires intérieures**

Budget des dépenses

Ministère des Affaires rurales

Travaux du comité

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Mercredi 12 novembre 2025

Chair: Aris Babikian
Clerk: Stefan Uguen-Csenge

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ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES

Wednesday 12 November 2025

Mercredi 12 novembre 2025

The committee met at 1404 in committee room 1.

ESTIMATES

MINISTRY OF RURAL AFFAIRS

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs for a total of two hours.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address.

For any staff appearing today, when you are called on to speak for the first time, please state your name and your title so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard.

Are there any questions from members before we start? Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 5001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Rural Affairs.

Minister Thompson, the floor is yours.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you very much, Chair, and I appreciate the opportunity to appear in front of the interior committee to talk about the new ministry, known as the Ministry of Rural Affairs, for the Ontario government.

My name is Lisa Thompson, as the Chair mentioned. I have the honour of serving as the Minister of Rural Affairs in Ontario, and I proudly represent the riding of Huron–Bruce as their member of provincial Parliament.

I want to thank everyone for being here today because it gives me a chance to talk about all the good things that we're doing for rural Ontario. As you know, we're here to discuss our government's vision for protecting rural Ontario by highlighting our accomplishments and work already under way at our ministry.

Joining me today is my deputy minister, Martha Greenberg, director Scott Duff and our teams. They have done an amazing job. Publicly, I want to share with everyone that I truly appreciate their heart and their desire to make sure that rural Ontario knows they've got a government and a bureaucracy that understands them and is working hard every day to make sure that we help our small towns and our communities reach their potential.

It's important to note, Chair, that 2.5 million people call small-town rural Ontario home. There are 268,000 busi-

nesses, and that's growing every day, in small-town and rural Ontario. What does that translate into? Most recent stats show that that translates into \$116.5 billion in GDP. Rural Ontario matters.

But it's changing, Chair. New people are moving in, and new businesses are continuing to grow and open. We also need to be looking beyond the horizon, to look for new opportunities, not only for people to call small-town rural Ontario home, but for new businesses to be welcomed into Ontario as well. With the infusion of fresh ideas and renewed enthusiasm, new opportunities are growing every day. This includes significant investments from companies looking to expand and add value to their existing operations in rural communities to better serve Canadian and international markets.

Our government's commitment to building and expanding roads, bridges and highways to better link rural areas with larger urban centres is a priority. We're also investing in major infrastructure projects to continue to improve quality of life for rural residents and businesses in every part of Ontario.

There are simply too many examples of positive change and growth to highlight them all, but we also need to be real: Challenges remain. But I can tell you, through the leadership of Premier Ford and our government, we can confidently stand before you today, Chair, to tell you we're looking forward to the future.

A big part of my role as Minister of Rural Affairs is to ensure that our rural communities are well positioned to seize not only current but emerging economic opportunities available to them. I want to speak a little bit about that today and how we're meeting and looking to exceed that very goal.

Our government has a vision for how to best support thriving communities and small towns. Strong and dynamic rural areas of Ontario are essential to the overall province's economy and success. Something that clearly is always top of mind these days for everyone is how do we continue to work together to reduce the harmful economic impacts of President Trump's tariffs while protecting Ontario workers, businesses and communities in every corner of this province.

You might ask, how are we doing that in rural Ontario? Well, to start with, we needed a beacon—that proverbial North Star, if you will—a guiding document to help not only our ministry, but the entire provincial government and our stakeholders to provide the best possible resources

to businesses, organizations and individuals whose success is critical to rural Ontario, and we wanted to start by listening. I mention that a lot.

That's why, in 2024, we travelled across the province to hear from community leaders, elected municipal officials and those who proudly call rural Ontario home. We worked with partner ministers across government to identify a whole range of programming to continue to support and grow rural economic development.

Most importantly, we connected directly with stakeholders to better understand the challenges they face every day. We also learned what they needed from government to support economic growth and promote community engagement.

I was honoured to launch Enabling Opportunity: Ontario's Rural Economic Development Strategy in January of this past year at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference in Toronto. It was incredibly well received. People saw themselves in it, and they saw the opportunities that lie ahead of us.

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is our government's strategy for working collaboratively with businesses, rural leaders, not-for-profits and Indigenous groups to help ensure their success across three key pillars that essentially percolated to the top of every discussion and conversation that not only I had, but our teams behind us, as well as amazing parliamentary assistants Pinsonneault and Bailey when they too travelled the province. Those three pillars are key and are fundamental in moving forward with confidence.

Those three themes—or pillars, if you will—are: supporting business development and attraction; growing a dynamic workforce; as well as creating a safe and strong community, if you will, for people to call home. These pillars collectively, in our strategy, enable business development and attraction, as I mentioned, while attracting and retaining a strong workforce that sees themselves in small-town and rural Ontario—all the while seeking new investments in rural communities that create even greater, stronger places for people to live, work and raise their families and, most importantly, as I referenced, call home.

We would like to take a few minutes to talk about a program that is doing some heavy lifting in strengthening each of our pillars in our rural strategy, a program that emerged directly from Enabling Opportunity: Ontario's Rural Economic Development Strategy and consultations we held across the province. We saw the need to continue to invest in Ontario, and we've done just that through a program called the Rural Ontario Development Program. The expanded and modernized Rural Ontario Development Program has a \$20-million envelope for the next two years. This is actually double what was previously available through the former Rural Economic Development Program.

To strengthen the impact of the Rural Ontario Development Program, our ministry implemented some important changes this year, particularly focusing on who could be eligible to apply for the funding. The first intake of the program allowed rural bricks-and-mortar businesses with

between one and 20 employees that are in rural Ontario the chance to apply for funding through a business-specific application stream.

We also recognize that rural areas exist within urban boundaries of larger cities. We heard that loud and clear, and that is why we expanded our definition of "rural" to be more inclusive of rural communities within larger urban areas such as Ottawa. We're continuing to work with municipalities to identify additional areas that could be considered in the future.

We've also expanded what kinds of projects are eligible for support. Specifically, municipalities, not-for-profits and Indigenous organizations were able to apply for the rural Ontario development funding, known as ROD, to help map out strategies and plans for long-term economic growth. I hope I'm not letting the cat out of the bag, Deputy, but we've already received from our advisory panel the first batch of business applications. It's a proof point that we're on the right track. There's a lot of talk about succession, and there's a lot of talk about growth, and there's a lot of talk about the need to engage newcomers. I'm really proud about that.

Our hard-working ministry staff also stepped up to help applicants put their best foot forward through six English and French webinars and 235 one-on-one coaching sessions. We have an amazing team in the field across the province, and I want to thank each and every one of them for embracing the need to modernize a traditional economic development program to make sure we're building capacity to meet the needs for today and tomorrow.

This summer, I travelled to communities across the province, as did parliamentary assistants Pinsonneault and Bailey, to connect face-to-face with people in rural Ontario, especially in communities we know would benefit from applying to the ROD Program for funding assistance. Together, PAs Bailey and Pinsonneault and I launched the ROD Program's first intake window in June this past year in Clinton.

I was also honoured to be joined by numerous local government stakeholders who know first-hand the difference this program can make in small communities. I want to take a moment to thank the continued support from the chair of ROMA, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association. Christa Lowry believed in this so much, she actually made the hike from eastern Ontario to Clinton for that particular launch. And I know that Robin Jones, president of AMO, was only a text away.

The municipal leadership through wards, caucuses and individual municipalities mean a lot. The other thing I want to stress is, they don't hesitate to share feedback—good, bad or indifferent. That makes us stronger and that makes us better. I want to thank each and every one of them.

You know, over the summer, the parliamentary assistants and I spoke with hundreds of stakeholders in government, small business owners and other community leaders about how our ministry could support the work they're considering, leaving behind brochures and postcards to

help those stakeholders spread the word about our strategy as well as the ROD funding opportunity.

PA Pinsonneault—I want to give him a special shout-out—even took this message to northern Ontario to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the discovery of gold in Red Lake, and I thank him for that. PA Bailey connected with communities not only in his home municipality and his home riding, but across southwestern Ontario. I put this out there to everyone: The PAs also did a little bit of an exchange between their own ridings to learn and listen from each other as well.

There's so much value in getting on the ground, and that's one thing about the Ministry of Rural Affairs: We're not afraid to get out onto the concessions, onto the side-roads, be on the ground to actually see how thoughtful programming and policy can truly make a difference. Along my own travels, I met dozens of people running small businesses, innovative entrepreneurs looking to bring their ideas and experiences to life in rural areas, while I met others working tirelessly in local and regional governments to serve those who reside in rural Ontario.

The end result is that in 2025, when the ROD Program closed its first intake window on September 24, it received significant interest and a number of applications that far surpassed the program's predecessor. In fact, hundreds and hundreds of applications were submitted, and requests totalled nearly \$17 million in combined funding just for this first intake. Clearly, there's a need. But more importantly, the interest and enthusiasm for the program was outstanding, and the selection process is now under way. We're also helping applicants to look ahead by providing clarity on future program intakes, with the second intake anticipated to open later this winter.

What it all comes down to, ladies and gentlemen, is this: The changes we made to the ROD Program funding have been well received. I know, and I'm confident in saying, they will make meaningful and lasting differences in the lives of people who live, work and play, if you will, in rural Ontario. Because of the winter, snowmobile season is coming, so that's why I threw in that little tourism nod. But in all seriousness, strategic investments through the ROD Program will help diversify and grow local economies, making economic growth more inclusive and helping to ensure that rural Ontario can continue to share in the province's economic prosperity.

But what does that look like on the ground? Again, I mentioned our ministry and our teams aren't afraid to be out there on the concessions and the sideroads because that's really where the rubber meets the road and we can see first-hand how well policies and programming are working. Some recent examples of economic development projects that have been approved can be pointed to across this province.

In particular, I wanted to highlight three:

—\$195,000 went to Lanark county to rehabilitate the Tay Havelock Trail and bridges that connect numerous communities in the area. What an amazing boost for tourism;

—almost \$78,000 went to the Timmins Economic Development Corp. to implement a recruitment plan to attract doctors to rural parts of the north; and

—more than \$191,000 went to the Here For Now Theatre Co. to renovate the Stratford-Perth Archives building as a theatre for year-round productions, generating significant economic spinoffs, not just for Stratford, but the communities surrounding Stratford as well as in Perth county.

The wide range of projects that the Rural Ontario Development Program brings to life is absolutely remarkable. Here's something to understand about the impact of the investments: For every dollar invested through the ROD Program in rural communities, it is estimated that there will be a fourfold—4.4 to be exact—a 4.4-fold return on investment for every dollar invested. A visual that I like to use is: Think of one loonie going in and a \$5 bill being generated. That's to be celebrated and to be built on. That's impactful.

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We're enabling opportunities to create jobs and economic drivers through our programming. That will truly look to the future and build confidence that we have the capacity in small-town and rural Ontario to adapt and be current and, most importantly, forward-looking when it comes to new economies as well.

The ROD Program specifically is only one of many ways that our ministry is supporting sustained economic development growth throughout rural Ontario. We are funding eligible projects, yes, but we're also investing in the skills and knowledge behind the people who deliver those projects in their communities. We must invest and continue to be thoughtful about the importance of capacity building.

Several times a year, our ministry staff work with local municipal leaders, for example, to host Teeny Tiny Summits. These in-person and virtual gatherings are incredible opportunities for local businesses and municipal leaders to talk about their work, learn from outside experts and find new ways to collaborate in support of their municipalities and their communities.

Another program that I really like—and the exchange between PA Bailey and PA Pinsonneault kind of reflected this—is a nod to what the team does in the Ministry of Rural Affairs in the field. Through the First Impressions Community Exchange Program, our ministry has also helped facilitate cross-community exchanges so that neighbours can help one another understand how visitors perceive their hometown, informing priorities that could be considered as future investments.

Small changes to parking or way-finding signage can make an impact that is significant on local businesses. We need to support these communities to discover how they can best drive economic spinoffs.

Our ministry also provides access to tools that allow local communities and business leaders to better understand and respond to economic trends that could impact their bottom lines.

In the few moments I have left, I want to also highlight how our ministry is working to amplify and support the work that other ministries and our ministry are doing across government, through the whole of government, to apply a rural lens, tackling issues that rural Ontario could be reflected in and, most importantly, respond to and be successful with in terms of growing and becoming even better destinations for businesses and people.

Our ministry is collaborating with the Ministry of Health to ensure greater access for rural residents to essential services like health care. In my own riding, earlier this fall, I had an awesome day supporting three out of many local family health teams expand their vision and their reach to ensure people have access to primary health care.

We're also working with the Ministry of Infrastructure to ensure local governments of all sizes can access funds to build the housing-enabling infrastructure that they need to face Ontario's housing challenges. I'm sure we all in rural Ontario can point to specific examples that the Ministry of Infrastructure as well, as the whole of government, have had positive impacts on.

I can't help but think of the most recent International Plowing Match and Rural Expo in the Niagara area. There was a lot of talk and a lot of appreciation expressed from that local municipal leadership on the work that's being done in the Niagara region, and they have confidence because of that in our government.

We also know how critical improving broadband and cellular access throughout rural Ontario is for access to services and business competitiveness.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: That's why we continued working closely with the Ministry of Energy.

But Chair, honest to goodness, there are so many examples that I could use. I could go on and on and on, as I know you trust. We are a dedicated group of people that are proud to work with local communities and municipalities throughout rural Ontario.

I'm proud of the work our government is doing. I look forward to doing so much more through the Ministry of Rural Affairs. We have so many champions across our government.

In particular, I'm particularly proud of rural affairs because—guess what? As a result of the most recent election in Newfoundland and Labrador, during an FPT meeting just this past Friday afternoon, I learned that even that province is following Ontario's lead and looking to have a greater focus on rural economic development.

Our ministry will continue doing its part to protect Ontario, and we look forward to that all-of-government approach.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister.

We will start the first round of questioning, and the round will start with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, staff, for being here, and thank you for launching the ministry. I'm very supportive. We're very supportive. I

think all governments have a tendency to talk a good game but at the end of the day kind of forget about rural Ontario.

You mentioned quite a few issues. I did read in your policy booklet, and you mentioned in your speech as well, that you're applying a whole-of-government rural lens to support policy and program outcomes in rural Ontario. My first question is, how does that work? How does someone other than a municipality approach the Ministry of Rural Affairs regarding their doctor shortages? To be an active ministry, you have to have an opening, and I'm not sure that people in rural Ontario would think of the Ministry of Rural Affairs to talk to them about doctors. So how do they approach the Ministry of Rural Affairs?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, very good. I appreciate that question very much. Obviously, we're a ministry—as is our entire government—that really values the working relationships that we have with our rural municipalities. I am very pleased to share with you that, more and more, I'm being asked to speak on panels and/or as keynote speaker at various functions to drive home the point and increase awareness that our ministry is there. But specifically, I want to speak to the wardens' caucuses in eastern Ontario and western Ontario, as well as our regional municipal organizations, NOMA, FONOM—ROMA I mentioned before—and AMO as well. They know that they can reach out to us at any time.

In terms of the specific example that you used, in that cross-government approach regarding doctors for rural Ontario, we have a number of programs that we work with the Ministry of Health to help promote, and organizations as well that we can be a conduit through. One example of an organization is the Rural Ontario Medical Program. Just recently I was in Collingwood, and it's no accident that, in the spirit of building capacity, an amazing champion of the Rural Ontario Medical Program is also a director of the Rural Ontario Institute. It's through those threads and building of relationships that we continue to let people know that it makes sense to reach out to our ministry and then, on their behalf, we will elevate their voice with the appropriate minister as well.

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. I'm not trying to be critical in any way; I'm just trying to find out how this works. So the easiest route would be through municipal organizations, through established organizations?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: That's one, but I would be remiss, with all due respect, if I didn't give a shout-out to the amazing field team. I'll take it back and talk to them that you expressed interest in the work that they do in the field. I can't help but think of Carolyn Puterbough from eastern Ontario. She's got her fingers on the pulse of everything that's happening. And her colleagues Chloe or Pierrette from the Timiskaming area—

Mr. John Vanthof: Okay. I know Pierrette well.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: You know her? I thought so, yes. That would be another conduit for local people to work through. Pierrette is another wonderful example.

Mr. John Vanthof: You answered my question.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: There you go.

Mr. John Vanthof: So working with other ministries, is there is an established route? How is that supposed to work? Governments are famous for working in silos and missing each other. To put an effective rural lens on government policies, is there a protocol how that's supposed to—when a government comes out with a new policy, have they run it by your ministry to see if it's going to fly, yes or no, in your part of the world?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'm really proud of the team we have, both in the ministerial office as well as on the official side, because they're established and people know to reach out to them.

Full disclosure, sometimes we do have to knock on a door and say, "We understand this is something that's being considered, and we certainly would value an opportunity to place that rural lens on it."

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To give you an example: I was absolutely honoured to announce the additional funding for the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund on behalf of Minister Bethlenfalvy just a couple of short weeks ago. That additional \$50 million that was announced to be going to rural municipalities was incredibly well received. It was awesome that he allowed the Ministry of Rural Affairs to own that announcement on his behalf.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you. I have no doubt that the extra OMPF funding is very welcome. A lot of municipalities are struggling.

If I could back up for a second: Congratulations on the ROD Program.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you.

Mr. John Vanthof: Congratulations on its doubling. I think it's still incredibly small compared to what the need is. I would lobby to make it bigger.

But, as you would know, rural municipalities are struggling. You mentioned bridges. Just in my riding, I can name three that are going to close. One is closed, and two are going to close. The reason they're closing is because the municipality is looking at them, and they just do not have the funding to rebuild them.

I'll use this example. The municipality of Iroquois Falls had to close a bridge. And you would know this: In the last few years, their Mennonite community has exploded. Because of that bridge closure, there is a lot of horse-and-buggy traffic on the Trans-Canada Highway. That's incredibly dangerous for everyone. And I don't blame the municipality of Iroquois Falls; the budget just wasn't there. That's happening in other areas too.

So I was interested that you mentioned bridges, and I'm sure you're bringing that to the Ministry of Infrastructure—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Absolutely.

Mr. John Vanthof: Right? And I'm not trying to be political, but when we hear "tunnel under the 401," rural Ontario retches.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: If I may jump in here as well, I think a large part of my role is making sure municipalities have an opportunity to network, like that first impressions exchange program that I referenced because

there are good examples across this province that might be helpful to other municipalities.

For instance, from a tourism perspective: Most recently, chief government whip Matt Rae and I were together on the Guelph-to-Goderich trail. A local mayor from Perth East joined us on that trail, and she talked about efficiencies that her municipality is realizing. I asked if I could amplify her message, and she said absolutely.

An example would be, instead of going out and having a third-party engineer come back and do a report, they actually now have a homegrown, bona fide engineer on staff in their municipality. And it's amazing the efficiencies that that gentleman is realizing on behalf of that municipality to make their dollars go farther. That's just one small example of how we need to continue to provide opportunities for municipalities to share those good-news stories because there's a lot of learning and take-aways from that too.

Mr. John Vanthof: I commend that municipality. It's a great idea. I was on municipal council for 12 years. I know that. But we have to look at all municipalities, you will agree.

So you gave an example of a municipality. I'll give another example of a municipality in which 90% of the agricultural land belongs to two companies. That municipality had 500 inhabitants; it's now down to 100. They can't pay the tax. They are no longer functioning. As soon as those investment farmers buy the land, the first thing they do is bulldoze the buildings because they don't want to pay tax. I get that. I understand it from a business perspective. But how are those municipalities going to function?

People say, "Oh, farmers don't need the same services." That's not true, because that agricultural land—most of us are rural people here. Look at the size of a combine these days. You need twice as much road, twice as heavy a bridge. We have a local potato farm. Do you know how much they beat up the roads? But there's no longer a tax base.

I'm not asking you to answer this question. This is a rural issue, and, furthermore, a big part of that. I'm sure this is happening in other parts of the province, but what we have now are blocks of thousands of acres that belong to one numbered company, or belong to a pension fund. What happens when that pension fund says, "Thou shalt no longer do this on our land"? Those are huge issues.

Again, yes, I'm asking for a comment, but I'm not I'm not being critical. It said in your policy book to look for emerging issues, and you mentioned a lot of opportunities, and I get it. But some of these are big challenges—perhaps maybe not in some areas. I know the Oxford county area pretty well because of Ernie, but that's much different. There's manufacturing there, and there's very strong agriculture.

But many parts of our province are strictly agriculture, and those small towns depend on it. When Timiskaming starts losing people because all the land belongs to four or five companies, it's not going to be a good thing, and that's going to happen across Ontario.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I understand your comment. I want to share with you that we recognize not only opportunities, but there are going to be challenges as well as we stickhandle and look to the future.

But one thing that I'm always committed to—and you can trust this—is getting out and about and hearing from people. This is my opportunity to promote the fact that very soon, in the new year, we'll be going out and hosting rural summits. To your very point, with all due respect, I said we need to take our summits out to the different corners of Ontario because the issues and the realities are very different—from Niagara to Nipissing, from Dryden down to Dundalk, out east and to Windsor as well.

So we need to hear about those things and have those thought collections, so that collectively, we can think about how we move forward to address the very concerns that you shared today.

Mr. John Vanthof: I really appreciate that answer, Minister. I really do.

Just one other example—it's in my thought process. In that municipality—we are all familiar with municipal drains. I have two on my farm. Sometimes you don't always agree with the municipal drain assessment, but you work it out, right? A local engineer—you work it out. Now when they have a problem, it's "Talk to our Bay Street lawyer."

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It slows you down.

Mr. John Vanthof: That's not the same, right? It's crippling rural municipalities. It really is.

Anyway, I'm going to give a positive question. Again, \$20 million is your—it's a doubling. I get it.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: At this point, yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: But in your opinion, since you had \$17 million in the first—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: In the first intake.

Mr. John Vanthof: So there is opportunity for a bigger fund than that. Is there need in rural Ontario to provide more services than you've been able to?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute left.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay. I am always, always looking to identify opportunity to bring more investment back to rural Ontario. Everybody in this room, and probably listening today, knows that I'm a huge advocate and fighter for rural Ontario. We have to be mindful of what it's taking right now to protect Ontario and how we can be a good partner in moving forward together. I think there are creative ways that we also can address that burgeoning need that's out there—again, not only for today's needs, but looking to that horizon as well.

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Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

We move to the government side. MPP Bailey.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you, Chair, and through you and to the minister: Thank you, Minister, for that explanation this afternoon. I want to acknowledge, also, the opportunity that you gave me to be a PA—MPP Pinsonneault and I—to work throughout southwestern Ontario and the north, as MPP Pinsonneault has done, and get to meet and

see the people of Ontario in rural Ontario and small-town Ontario. I remember being in Lucan with you, and that was a great day up there in Lucan, Ontario.

Could you explain a little more? I know you mentioned the rural lens, the opportunities that you see in rural Ontario that you haven't had a chance to speak to yet, to provide the services and opportunities to the people of rural Ontario.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Sure. Thank you for that question. I may lead into my response, PA Bailey, with a reflection that I had. You know, being here since 2011 with some colleagues around this room today, we heard time and time again, when we sat in opposition, that there was a need for a rural lens. I'll never forget the moment, in speaking with Premier Ford, that it's like, my gosh, this ministry has the opportunity to be that lens.

It's with that said that I'm really pleased with the manner in which we're moving forward and identifying, with fellow ministries, how we can work so well together and bring investment back out to rural Ontario. We need to continue to build capacity as well.

There's an organization out there called the Rural Ontario Institute. I referenced them earlier, and I think some of the work that they're doing really reflects well on where that proverbial puck is going in terms of addressing goals for small towns and rural areas throughout this province.

I think we need to be eyes wide open and recognize that with strife there comes opportunity. As we look to protect Ontario from Trump's tariffs, there are going to be windows opening up for new opportunities as people look to onshore and reshore business back to Ontario. We can work with our municipalities to make sure that they are in a position to welcome new business opportunities as well.

I want to give a nod to the Ministry of Finance. They're just in the midst of coordinating round tables to hear from stakeholders across the province about where stakeholders feel we need to be focusing. They're making every effort to come out to small-town Ontario as well, and I applaud them for that. I'd like to think that I've had an impact in that regard as well, in making sure rural voices are heard at an equal rate to people from larger urban centres.

The other thing I want to share with you is that we need to be ready and working with stakeholders, and meeting with stakeholders like Enbridge. Looking at the amazing work that is being done through the Ministry of Energy and Mines, we're hearing loud and clear that there's going to be a desire for bringing new business to Ontario, and we need to be taking a look at what that new business looks like.

One example that I've talked about with cabinet colleagues is data centres. What does that look like in Ontario? What does hosting a data centre—to make sure Ontario's data is secure and sovereign—look like? And how can rural Ontario play a role in that?

Those are exciting conversations to be in, and it's just one example to answer you in terms of what else is out there on the horizon, and we need to make sure we're continuing to build capacity to meet those new and emerging demands as well.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you, Minister. I'll yield the balance of my time to PA Pinsonneault.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks for being here, Minister. Seeing that you started this ministry right from the ground up, and I was your first parliamentary assistant appointed, I've seen you grow this. You've assembled an amazing staff; honestly, you have. They're amazing to work with.

In the tour up through northern Ontario, the ROD Program was talked about up there, and it is amazing the effect it is having on those communities.

The round tables that we did this past year: You allowed me to chair a couple of those, and that was a really good learning experience for me. But it does show that your commitment to getting public input is second to none. Everything that you've done thus far, as an MPP and a minister, brings you to this point. And I think you've done an amazing job of getting this ministry off the ground and running.

Through you, Chair: Minister, I'm proud that the government has recognized the importance of having a dedicated Ministry of Rural Affairs. As a member of a rural riding myself, I know that rural Ontario has unique challenges when it comes to growth, infrastructure and workforce attraction.

Minister, how does having a dedicated Ministry of Rural Affairs ensure that rural perspectives are being heard and acted upon in government decision-making?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate your question and your leading comments.

I just want everyone to know that my very first job upon graduation from university was as a rural community adviser. It was interesting. The person that had a huge impact on me at the time was a lady who retired as an assistant deputy minister in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Her name was Christine Dukelow. My job as a rural community adviser was particularly focused on the regions of Peel and Halton, with a lot of provincial activities peppered in between.

She would always call me up, and I learned very quickly—and I shared this: We actually just recently had an entire ministry meeting that I'm so incredibly proud of, and I want to thank the deputy for pulling that together. And who was the guest speaker? Christine Dukelow—and I became nervous, because my boss was in the room.

But with that said, it's not an accident that our strategy talks to enabling opportunity because whenever Christine called back in the day, I knew that I could trust that there was a learning experience and/or something very positive that could come out of saying yes to her. I think we have to remember that when we look forward to rural economic development today, and looking ahead into tomorrow, we can't be afraid to say yes. In saying that, we'll learn from challenges, we'll learn from roadblocks, but we have to keep moving forward. And that's the zest that I bring to this ministry in the honour of serving as minister.

But the other thing I want to share with you is that we have a dedicated team across this province in terms of field

staff that I'd pit up against any ministry in the province of Ontario or across Canada because, again, they believe in it, they live it and they see the impacts every day of policies that work incredibly well and policies that go sideways.

And so, I think we need to continue in terms of having the best impact across this province in a consistent way, continuing to make sure that we are turning on all cylinders in the field, here at Queen's Park and throughout the bureaucracy as well so we can stay on the same page and keep rowing the proverbial boat together. In saying that, there's much more that we can do. I'll keep talking about that in a moment or two.

But at the end of the day, the Ministry of Rural Affairs, I would dare say, serves as a one window into the provincial government now. And, quite frankly, that's on my to-do list to figure out how we can better serve as that one window. I'm hoping the rural summits can help inform how we can be a better one window. That speaks to some of the things that we heard from the member opposite as well. That's going to be a game-changer also as we look to the future.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you, Minister, for being here today, and to the deputy and all the team, thank you very much.

Now, I have more of an urban riding. However, to get to my riding, you go through a rural area. So I get a lot of people commenting that they're wondering where they're going when they're getting to my riding because there's horse farms, there's agriculture, there's everything. So I'm basically one of those urban ridings that's surrounded by rural.

That being the case, when I was hearing you speak about some of those numbers—2.5 million people in rural areas, and I think you said 268,000 businesses—well, that's pretty darn impressive to be in this rural area. What you were just talking about, the rural lens—I know that has been resonating with the rural communities.

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So thinking about that and knowing that's close to my riding as well, can you explain what applying the rural lens means in practice, and how it can help ensure that policies and programs from other ministries better reflect the realities of these rural communities?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Very good. I appreciate your perspective very much, and we need to be talking about that more as well. The rural lens means, how does policy and programming impact people in small towns and communities across the province outside of larger urban areas? For me, that rural lens is about making sure people are listening, but most importantly advocating as well.

One example happened this past year. I got a quick text from Minister Kinga Surma after she made her announcement in the Niagara area about infrastructure dollars being made available to invest in irrigation. That was a game-

changer for businesses and farms alike in that area. And then fast-forward to when we were at the International Plowing Match and Rural Expo—I think of Mayor Sandra and her neighbouring municipal leaders that were so appreciative of how that came together.

I'll give you an example: I met with municipalities back in the day at AMO. During that conversation, I learned of some priorities and it's like, we should be able to work as a collective government to address that priority—at that time, being irrigation. While some things don't happen as quickly as you'd like, you never let up, you never let go, especially if it's the right thing to do.

Fast-forward to this past year when Minister Surma said, "We did it." She had other ministers included in that text. That's probably a highlight reel moment for me this past year, to show how rural affairs had an impact in bringing other ministries together to do and invest in what we need in small-town, rural Ontario.

I thank you for that question. It was good.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: That's excellent.

How much time?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two minutes.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Just to follow-up on that—because one of the other numbers you talked about was \$165 billion in GDP that brings with it. That's a pretty huge number as well. So, when I think about that, rural communities in this province offer so much to Ontario and those 2.5 million people as well.

Could you tell me how your ministry is really putting an additional impact on that \$165 billion in GDP?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Absolutely. There are many different ways. Again, starting with our rural municipalities, it's making sure they're setting the right climate and achieving the right scenarios to be able to attract that business because, as was mentioned earlier, we need to be helping as best we can in every corner of this province. We need to be helping municipalities increase their tax base, so that's something that we could do.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute left.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I was thinking about other examples coming together. Something some people might think is simple: safe roads. Just this past week, on Monday, PA Ric Bresee announced a \$10-million program to allow rural municipalities to apply to fix their roads in terms of potholes, and better roads to transport the goods that are manufactured in Exeter down to Port Huron to cross the border—that matters. Again, that idea of fixing potholes, that conversation, started between rural affairs and the Ministry of Transportation through Ric Bresee over a year ago.

I have to give a shout-out to Chris too, because he was very involved in that. Chris, you know who you are. He works on my team. He was very thoughtful in bringing that pothole idea forward. It's another example of how we've mentioned it and grown it into a reality that will make a difference across Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The time is up. That concludes the first round of questions and answers.

We will move to the second round with MPP Vanthof.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you, Chair. It's going to be a comment.

I'm sure every municipality is very thankful for the pothole program. I saw all the Facebook ads, and when I saw them, Highway 11 was closed for the 32nd day. This is a rural thing.

You said, Minister, that the governments and municipalities want to onshore and reshape business opportunities in this province, in this country. The Trans-Canada Highway in northern Ontario is the weakest link in our whole country's transportation system. You have all these ads about the Ring of Fire. You won't even get the equipment up the Trans-Canada. Everyone is appreciative of the pothole program. I get it. We're all strapped. Everybody is stretched for money.

But just because you mentioned it, I need to put on the record: The minister knows it, but when you go above North Bay, the Trans-Canada Highway turns into a two-lane country road with at least 2,000 trucks a day. From January until the end of September, it was closed cumulatively 31 days, the Trans-Canada Highway in Ontario.

So when we hear the pothole program—there's big issues out there. I'm coming to a question on the Trans-Canada Highway.

When the minister said in the House that, well, the police close it—the police don't close it for fun; they close it because there's accidents, because there's maintenance problems. It's the Trans-Canada Highway.

If you could take it back, if the government is really serious about economic development in Ontario and you're really serious about the Ring of Fire—and you don't even need the Ring of Fire. There are so much minerals in northern Ontario. My whole riding is gold country.

The country roads in southern Ontario, most of them are in way better shape than Highway 11, and most of them don't have 2,000 trucks a day. Anyway, rant over.

I've been listening closely, and you've launched a new ministry. You've got great staff. I have no doubt about that; I worked with many of them. You've done round tables.

I know every area is different, but could you name or describe possibly three roadblocks that rural Ontario is facing that the government could address? What are common obstacles? I know in my part of the world, attracting professionals when you can't get a doctor— attracting doctors, right? But what are the three that you can almost guarantee that a municipal official or someone is going to say, "Okay, we need help with X"? Could you name the top three?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Sure, yes.

Before I do, I just want to share with you that in tandem on Monday, when PA Bresee was making his \$10-million announcement for safe roads in rural Ontario, Minister Pirie and Minister Rickford were also in northern Ontario talking about winter maintenance and how our government is committing, I want to say, \$30 billion over the next 10 years in terms of commitment to northern roads as we continue to build and work towards realizing the Ring of

Fire. So it's coming, and we understand what you're saying, very much so.

In terms of three challenges that we see, we need to be real—the workforce and understanding how AI is going to impact manufacturing and production in the years going forward. There is research and homework we need to be doing as well, in tandem, as we look to the future and make sure that research and findings translate back into the realities.

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Another thing is making sure that newcomers who are able to come to Canada understand that they're welcome. I was at the kickoff to the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program class 21 evening. Being a past participant in class 6, it's something that's near and dear to me as well.

I ran into Mary Lichty. Her husband was in my class of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program. She told me about an organization that she's involved in that typically coordinates the local fair, but it's become so much more than just an organization coordinating an annual fair. They now host regular events for fundraising to help with local priorities.

But what caught my ear—and I actually spoke about it from the podium—was how they are coordinating newcomer events, not just for newcomers but for her home community as well, so that they can come together and build relationships and learn from each other, because we know the fabric of rural Ontario is going to change in the years to come. We have to make sure that everyone understands how we all have to adapt to make sure that we have the workforce and that the people in our schools, in our churches and buying on our main streets feel welcome. That's something that is being done organically at the local level that is addressing that particular roadblock as well.

I'm not going to hide the fact I have a situation in my riding right now that frustrates me. We need a federal government to get onside and be timely in working with workers who have established themselves as international workers in this province. The federal government is a huge roadblock, and they need to get onside because it's a heartbreak. Their indifference and their lack of timeliness and heart is causing grief at the local level.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you for that answer, Minister.

I'm going to shift gears and give you a real easy one. You mentioned AALP. Not everybody understands AALP, so how about a minute to describe AALP?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Why, thank you very much. I'll take that minute.

The Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program is a capacity-building program that brings community leaders from both rural Ontario and corporate Ontario and ag business together to spend 18 months together. What do they do? First of all, they come together to learn leadership skills, but most importantly, they start taking a look at local issues, concerns and good news to see how policy and programming can make a difference, not only at their local community level but in the province of Ontario. And the sweet spot about this program is that then, over the 18

months, that capacity continues to build from an economic perspective.

That class then integrates and builds relationships and networks throughout North America with similar programs and businesses that are interested in that type of capacity building. Then it culminates in an international experience that is the exclamation point behind why, to have successful rural communities and small towns, we need to have a global mindset.

I know that PA Vickers could speak as equally well to the program, as a past participant in that program.

Mr. John Vanthof: That's an elevator speech.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you.

Mr. John Vanthof: I appreciate your comments on newcomers because rural Ontario is changing, and I'm not sure everyone in rural Ontario is ready for it. I notice it myself, because I've been here since 2011. I come from a very rural part of Ontario, so I'm much more accustomed to different cultures than when I go home—people aren't. So I really appreciate the comment that that is something we need to work on for rural Ontario. Maybe that's something that AALP could help us with too, right?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: The Rural Ontario Institute, yes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes. This isn't a question, but I really appreciated that you brought it up, because a lot of people—Ontario, Canada, is made up of immigrants. I look at the names. We're all from—or our parents or grandparents are all from different places, and the same thing is still happening. We still need their expertise, their drive.

So what does Ontario need to do to make rural Ontario a natural place for newcomers to go? Because I don't think that's the case now.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'm going to be honest with you: I don't have the answer right here, right now, but you're inspiring me, and that's what makes my deputy nervous and my team behind me nervous, because I'm always coming up with ideas. Look at them—

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm not supposed to inspire the ministers; I'm supposed to make them nervous, but I'm not good at that.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: But maybe we have to have a rural summit on that very thing. Maybe that theme for that rural summit happens in New Liskeard and happens in different pockets, and then we can bring the results and the findings together and then percolate what makes sense for all of Ontario. Thank you for that.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm going to tell a little story that actually pertains to this. Anyone in rural Ontario knows what the Ontario Farmer is. In the Ontario Farmer, they've got nice pictures of a newly married couple, a couple of John Deeres—or in a couple of cases or in my case, New Hollands. I happened to be reading the Ontario Farmer in the lobby of the Legislature. A former MPP, a colleague of mine, Gurratan Singh, walked by. He says, "You do that too?" I say, "What?" He opened his phone: picture after picture of Sikh couples in India, with tractors in the background. So we're not that different; we just don't know.

He didn't know that we did it, and I didn't know that he did it.

And that was—you can see I'm kind of running out of questions here.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Well, I would just like to go on record to say, when the good member comes to Bruce county for the 2026 International Plowing Match and Rural Expo, we'll make sure he has a New Holland to drive. How's that?

Mr. John Vanthof: No, I'm not that—

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Okay. Just checking.

Mr. John Vanthof: Anyway, how much time do I have left, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two minutes.

Mr. John Vanthof: Where do you find your program has the most success—like, what type of applications?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I'm going to be honest with you: I find there's success in all of our streams. But the one thing that I referenced very quickly, the new stream that we created through the Rural Ontario Development Program for businesses with employees between one to 20 people—there has been a lot of interest in succession planning. To me—I don't use this word often; everybody behind me knows this—but that makes me excited because we in small-town Ontario do not want to see our rural businesses close and our main streets become desolate. We want to see how we can enable people who have a successful business but don't have anyone in their family or don't have anyone interested in carrying that business forward. Let's help them plan for a retirement they could be proud of but all the while enable a young couple or an individual to start a new business.

I want to give kudos to the mayor of Huron-Kinloss. At a crossroads called Holyrood, Ontario, is a place to go for one of the biggest ice creams you'd ever see in the province of Ontario. The couple was retiring. Their health was starting to fail, but they didn't have anyone in their family interested in taking the business over, but the municipality helped them out. Now, there's a young family at that crossroads carrying on the tradition of some of the most ginormous ice cream cones you could ever get your hands on. They're keeping that business viable and they're proud that together, as a family, they can keep going.

So I really look forward to seeing what we can do in the spirit of succession planning. We have it for farms. Why don't we have it for rural businesses as well? I want to continue to move that ball down the road.

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Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you. I'm done.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you.

We move to the government side. MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: I've always thought rural and urban need each other, and I think we have the opportunity to help complement each other. It doesn't always happen, but I think to make Ontario a stronger place overall, we need rural. Not to forget about urban, but urban can't forget about rural.

Lisa, I think you're the person to make sure rural doesn't get left behind. The energy you bring to the ministry and to rural Ontario and promoting them is excellent.

Minister, many rural leaders have said that this government listens and that they finally feel that their voices are being heard. Can you share how stakeholder feedback from round tables, consultations and local visits have influenced the ministry's priorities and informed the rural strategy and ROD Program?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate that question very much. I'm immediately thinking about the eastern wardens' caucus. Bonnie Clark is the current chair of that caucus. They're not afraid to hit you between the eyes with what's working and what's not, and I appreciate that. We need to have those frank discussions.

But they're also willing to work with us. Upon hearing the focus and the direction this ministry was taking, I would dare say both the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus as well as the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus developed strategies that fit really well into our overall provincial strategic plan for rural Ontario. That made me smile because it shows our relevance. They're targeted, and they are looking at workforce. They are looking at how to attract new business and help the businesses they already have continue to grow.

Moreover, they're also looking outside of our traditional borders. I know that there have been some synergies realized, and I always say this: What are other jurisdictions doing? How do we compare to other jurisdictions?

Bonnie Clark was comparing what was happening in eastern Ontario with Irish jurisdictions. They just had an opportunity to compare what's happening in eastern Ontario with communities in Ireland. That's healthy, and I like to think we helped spur some of that to happen.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Minister, thank you so much for being here today. I'm quite excited about the new Ministry of Rural Affairs. My riding is one that has a very strong urban component but a very strong rural component. The town of Tecumseh has certainly been a recipient of some of the RED funding over the years, and I'm certainly looking forward to encouraging them to apply to the new ROD Program.

Just one thing I've struggled with because I live in the urban area, but I certainly have a strong rural constituency, is getting connected in my outreach to my rural communities. So I'm hoping you might be able to share how your ministry facilitates your outreach to rural Ontario and how you're able to stay connected with the rural communities across the province.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's about building relationships. PA Vickers and I were just with Minister Jones, and I saw Minister Cho there as well on Monday—when I say “there,” I mean the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair.

The whole point about relationships was driven home for me. I was in the show ring talking to a bunch of young people about why rural Ontario matters and how some of those young people could potentially become young entrepreneurs that invest in business and small towns.

I actually called out an amazing lady by the name of Jackie Fraser, who once upon a time was amazing in the show ring. Now she and her husband run a very successful business in Fergus, Ontario. Honest to goodness, before I left the show ring, somebody else had texted her twice saying I had given her a shout-out. That goes to show you the type of networking and how relationships work in rural Ontario.

Looking to you specifically in terms of Tecumseh and the Windsor area, I think we need to continue to support you in terms of your outreach to rural organizations.

You know what? I grew up in the 4-H program. I know John can probably appreciate this, and PA Vickers. To this day, I could probably go—and they'll say the same—to almost any region in the province of Ontario and know somebody or know their cousin. And that opens a door for me. We have to get back to some of that old-fashioned networking, and that's what the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program does so incredibly well also.

When I look to the horizon and I wear my rose-coloured glasses, one of my goals in terms of being that one-window approach for the province of Ontario into rural Ontario is creating opportunities to continue to build those networks. And so, I'd like to put it on the table for my team behind me that in terms of those rural summits I was referencing before, we need to come down and host one for you in your area and see where it goes from there.

Again, it's all about building relationships that you can trust. We just had that FPT meeting I referenced for rural Canada on Friday afternoon and, quickly, I was getting texts from other ministers. Relationship-building matters and it can take you a long way in terms of addressing tough situations or grasping that gold ring when it comes to opportunities because you can bring the right people around at the right time and have that honest-to-goodness conversation that ultimately drives genuine, successful results.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: You're welcome.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Gallagher Murphy.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Chair, through you to the minister: Thank you again. I was taking some notes of the some of the things you were mentioning during your remarks. You talked about how to become a better destination in the rural area for visitors. You talked about \$191,000 that went to the Here For Now Stratford theatre in Perth county, which I have to say—destinations, Here For Now; putting money in that sounds good. When I think about your announcement you made earlier this year on the Rural Ontario Development Program, the ROD Program—and it's replacing the previous RED Program—I think about this Here For Now and what you're striving to do with rural destinations.

My question is if you can share what is unique about the ROD Program. Maybe it is the Here For Now, I don't know, but maybe you can provide other examples. Here and now sounds pretty good to me.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Very good. I appreciate that very much. I think one unique aspect that I bring to this role as Minister of Rural Affairs is an old-fashioned commitment to extension work. Some people might say, "What the heck is that?" Well, back in the day, extension work was geared to government officials working within communities, and in working within that rural community, you would identify gaps and opportunities. But it wasn't up to that government official, that government extension worker, to actually do the work, but rather build the capacity of people within that community to identify the opportunities, to build skills and to fill that gap. And then, once they were all energized and they had the means and the skills, then, in the true spirit of extension work, government needed to get out of the way.

That's a goal that I have with the Rural Ontario Development Program. You referenced tourism as an example. I see an opportunity through the Rural Ontario Development Program to further that whole notion of extension. That is helping communities identify gaps that they want to address in the spirit of rural economic development, with tourism being one of them; build capacity, so that they can build a strategic plan, for instance, to attract tourists to the area; and then get out of their way and let them soar in terms of how they fulfill that strategy.

When we can do that, that's when we're succeeding as a government.

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M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Great. Thank you very much.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: You're welcome.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Through you, I know, myself, right in the early beginning, I made several announcements from the RED Program, and I've seen first-hand how that really affected each community that I went to.

Can you share some of the success stories that have positively transformed other communities throughout Ontario?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Yes, I'd love to. I'll share some examples, but it's an opportunity for me to talk a little bit more about the integrity of the Rural Ontario Development Program. We work with an advisory panel, and the advisory panel has representatives from across Ontario. I'm really proud to say—and the member from Timiskaming will know this name—the chair of that third-party review committee that reviews all the applications that come in for all the streams is Michael Barrett, the former CEO of Gay Lea Foods. Talk about a vision.

PA Vickers, I don't know whether you're still a member of Gay Lea Foods or not. You're still a member?

Interjection.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: You're still a member of Gay Lea Foods, yes, and former chair of Gay Lea Foods.

Think about that: Two brothers had a vision of working co-operatively with the community to pool eggs and pool milk and create a better margin of return in that spirit, and

then it's grown into a wonderful national company with a presence in Manitoba and throughout Ontario. It solely focuses on adding value in the dairy sector. But again, it started as a small vision and an incubator, if you will, for something that's grand.

So when we think about the Rural Ontario Development Program, I love what comes back from the advisory committee in terms of applications that may have that very entrepreneurial spirit that the Thompson brothers had or that opportunity to make a difference. Who knows what could become of that, using Gay Lea Foods as an example?

I think about Thrive Oxford. Many of us, I'll say, in this room had the opportunity to attend the outdoor farm show just outside of Woodstock this past fall. Why was I there? Because Thrive Oxford, that received rural economic development funding from the Ministry of Rural Affairs, actually received funding to promote new and upcoming businesses.

Even Senator Black's niece had a new business that she was promoting, and I love the focal point that it had along a main corridor at that show outside of Woodstock. That to me was a great investment of rural economic development funding because it was geared towards promoting new and small business in Oxford county. That made me smile when I saw that.

Another example would be when we were in Belleville to launch just last year—PA Pinsonneault, you were with me. There was a lot of money going into making sure unhoused people had proper wraparound supports. That was an initiative through the local chamber and BIA, and they received rural economic development funding to help further local solutions to make their downtown strong and safe to visit. That was a good day, when we were in Belleville.

I think about an online travel application for eastern Ontario as well. Mayor Nancy Peckford and Mayor Corinna Smith-Gatcke were involved in it as well. It was an online tracking application. It scored the highest from the advisory panel a year ago, and it was designed to be an online application to help people tour and move around their communities better. There are so many applications that are very, very different.

The Rural Ontario Medical Program, I know, has expressed interest in how our RED Program could potentially help them satisfy some of their goals as well. The list goes on and on.

In terms of capital investment, I know of a medical centre that's become a hub in small-town Ontario. This small town doesn't even have a grocery store, but because of the vision and that initial capital investment, what used to be just a doctor's clinic has attracted physiotherapy, which is a growing concern in terms of a business; an esthetician; a hearing clinic; and—who knows? The sky will be the limit when we take a look at how some of that seed money can help a small town flourish.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much, Minister.

That concludes two rounds of questions and answers. I just want to remind the committee members that the time allotted for these estimates is maximum two hours, unless the committee members guide me or instruct me otherwise. What is the pleasure of the committee members: to continue with the third round of questioning or—

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm okay with two rounds.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): How about the government side?

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Can we do that?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes, it is up to the committee, because—

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: And we can go right to our vote?

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes. Don't forget: We don't have the third party present, so that's why we are—

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Anyway, I am quite happy to do whatever you want.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Let's go right to the vote.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Yes? Okay.

That concludes the committee consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Before I go and ask the members: Thank you very much, Minister and staff, for being here and sharing your estimates with us.

Are the members ready to vote? Shall vote 5001, rural affairs program, carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. The motion carries.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs carry? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, the vote carries.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Rural Affairs to the House? All in favour, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, the vote carries. The motion is carried.

This concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Are there any other comments? MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I move that, pursuant to the order of the House dated November 6, 2025, and subject to the referral of Bill 40 to the Standing Committee on the Interior, the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to immediately post notices regarding the hearings on the Ontario parliamentary channel and on the Legislative Assembly's website; and

That witnesses appearing be permitted to participate in person or participate remotely; however, a maximum of one individual may appear in person on behalf of an organization and any additional representatives of that organization shall participate remotely; and

That legislative research provide the committee members with a summary of oral presentations and written submissions as soon as possible following the written submission deadline.

The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): We heard MPP Dowie's motion. Are there any comments or debate on the motion?

Seeing none, all in favour of the motion, please raise your hand. Any opposition? Seeing none, the motion is carried.

There being no further business, the committee stands adjourned until 9 a.m. on Monday, November 17, 2025.

Thank you very much and have a nice day.

The committee adjourned at 1529.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

Chair / Président

Mr. Aris Babikian (Scarborough–Agincourt PC)

First Vice-Chair / Premier Vice-Président

Mr. Sol Mamakwa (Kiiwetinoong ND)

Second Vice-Chair / Deuxième Vice-Président

Mr. Jonathan Tsao (Don Valley North / Don Valley-Nord L)

Mr. Aris Babikian (Scarborough–Agincourt PC)

Mr. Guy Bourgouin (Mushkegowuk–James Bay / Mushkegowuk–Baie James ND)

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto (Mississauga–Lakeshore PC)

Mr. Andrew Dowie (Windsor–Tecumseh PC)

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Newmarket–Aurora PC)

Mr. Sol Mamakwa (Kiiwetinoong ND)

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex PC)

Mr. Jonathan Tsao (Don Valley North / Don Valley-Nord L)

MPP Paul Vickers (Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound PC)

Substitutions / Membres remplaçants

Mr. Robert Bailey (Sarnia–Lambton PC)

Mr. John Vanthof (Timiskaming–Cochrane ND)

Clerk / Greffier

Mr. Stefan Uguen-Csenge

Staff / Personnel

Ms. Amanda Boyce, research officer,
Research Services