

From Queen's Park by Sylvia Jones MPP ? Association of Municipalities of Ontario annual general meeting

From Aug. 14 to 17, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) held their annual general meeting in Windsor. AMO represents the interests of nearly all 444 municipalities across Ontario, and their annual conference allows individuals from all levels of government, organizations and businesses that work with municipalities to come together to discuss the issues impacting our province's municipalities. More than 1,700 individuals attended this year's conference to discuss a variety of issues impacting municipalities across Ontario, ranging from infrastructure funding, asset management, rural economic development and the impact legalizing marijuana would have on policing.

One of the highlights of the conference are the keynote speeches by leaders from all three provincial parties, including by my leader Patrick Brown. During his speech, Brown talked about the fact the Provincial government continues to ignore the fact that municipalities are being forced to take on the responsibility of funding services they never had to before. Over the past four years, the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund (OMPF), which is used to help communities with transferred costs of services formerly provided by the province, has been cut by \$70 million by the government. This underlines the stress imposed on municipalities when the government refuses to provide the required funds to allow municipalities to provide necessary services.

Another major concern voiced during his speech was our province's rising hydro rates, which are now the highest in all of North America, even beating out the island of Hawaii. It continues to be the number one issue I hear from individuals and businesses. In addition to being a barrier to attracting business, it is pushing businesses and jobs away from our municipalities and province to neighboring jurisdictions. Not only are our skyrocketing hydro rates driving business out of the province, but they are forcing Ontarians into a state of energy poverty. Some Ontarians are paying as high as \$500 per month for hydro, whereas right across the border the average residential hydro bill for residents in Michigan is \$95. Many Ontarians are unable to pay for these exorbitant prices. Last year, more than eight per cent of homes across Ontario were in arrears. We must ensure hydro rates are affordable for individuals and businesses if we expect them to thrive here in Ontario.

Other concerns raised by Brown include chronic underfunding of our province's health care system and its impact on the delivery of mental health services. One in five people suffer from mental health issues, but many are unable to access the care they need. For many individuals, the last resort is our province's hospitals, which have seen a 54 per cent increase in emergency department visits over the last decade for mental health related issues. While use of our hospitals continues to rise, they continue to be underfunded. Coupled with the lack of community supports, our province's police services have become the de facto front line mental health workers, at a significant cost to municipalities who try to find ways better ways to manage police service budgets. We must ensure essential services are being provided, before mental health issues reach a crisis point in our province.

Every year, I attend AMO's annual conference, and it is a great opportunity to hear directly about the issues and concerns affecting all our municipalities across Ontario. I look forward to returning to AMO's annual conference next year and I look forward to continue working with our municipal partners to make Ontario a vibrant and prosperous place to live in.

