



A better deal for Eastern Ontario is the focus as Counties prepare to meet with Premier and MPPs

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For immediate release

Representatives of Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus will push for a better deal for this part of the province when they meet with provincial politicians on January 21 in Kingston. The Caucus has invited Premier Dalton McGuinty and other Government Members of the Legislature for the region to the session.

“We have to make the provincial government more aware of the specific needs of the rural parts of Eastern Ontario,” said Warden Sweet. “We are optimistic that by working with our representatives at Queen’s Park, we will get our concerns back onto the radar screen.”

The Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus, made up of the wardens of the 11 counties in the region, as well as the mayors of Kawartha Lakes and Prince Edward County, will share their views on three issues that they view as critical to the region: Crown lands, roads and bridges, and regional economic development.

“With its unique history, culture and local conditions, Eastern Ontario faces unique challenges in each of these areas,” Jacques Héту, Chair of the Caucus, explained.

For example:

- The region includes proportionately more Crown land than any other part of southern Ontario. Crown land is unavailable for development and pays no property tax to the local municipality. Building and maintaining roads is more expensive because counties have to take this protected land into account, and make sure logging trucks and other users can access it, but they receive none of the revenue it produces through lumber permits and other uses. “We would like to see some form of revenue-sharing that would acknowledge the way we have to service this land, without the benefit of taxes paid to the county,” Hetu said.
- With its low population density, Eastern Ontario has felt the downloading of responsibility for roads and bridges much more sharply than other parts of the province. Despite having a small property tax base, the region has had to take on

40 per cent of all highways transferred to the local level. This means counties can't properly maintain or rebuild them without help from senior governments. "These assets are not just used by our local property owners to get access to their property," Warden Sweet noted. "Tourists and businesses also use them, and this has a wider benefit that goes beyond our boundaries." The group would like to see the Province provide capital funding of \$25 million a year to former provincial highways, as well as operating support of \$5,000 a year for each two-lane kilometer. The jurisdictions that are responsible for arterial roads and bridges should also get a share of the gasoline tax and other user fees, such as vehicle plate and driver's licence fees, the group says.

- Despite downloading and other changes that have put a disproportionate burden on the region's rural taxpayers, Eastern Ontario is one of only two regions in Canada that were not included in a region-specific federal investment zone. Such zones elsewhere in Canada have provided funding for economic development programs. "The creation of an Eastern Ontario economic development agency is an important first step in an effective approach to growth and development in our communities," Héту said.

"We are hopeful that the Premier and the other members of his caucus who represent the region, including ministers Gerretsen and Dombrowsky, will join us and find this meeting beneficial," Warden Sweet said. "As our representatives at Queen's Park, we want to make sure they have the information they need to understand and advocate for the area."

Héту noted that, in addition to the specific issues to be addressed, the region shares a number of concerns with other municipalities across Ontario. "We are working with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, for example, to press for a more rational tax base that better reflects the abilities of each level of government to pay for services. We believe that the current structure has to change, so that what our level of government must fund is in line with our ability to pay and with the benefits of those services," he said.

The Caucus has previously met with Prime Minister Paul Martin and other federal ministers. "Working with our federal representatives, we were able to inject 10 million federal dollars into the development of new business and jobs. We are hoping that our collaboration with the government of Ontario, which has a much closer link to Ontario municipalities, will be as successful for our constituents," Héту said.

You can contact Warden Sweet for an interview or more information by calling 735-7288.