
Subject: Government Relations 2024 Year End Review and 2025 Initiatives

Report to: Committee of the Whole

Report date: Thursday, March 6, 2025

Recommendations

1. That Report CAO 2-2025 **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the corporate Government Relations (GR) activities Niagara Region engaged in throughout 2024, as well as planned activities and priorities for 2025.
- Municipalities have limited opportunities to directly engage with upper levels of government on an annual basis; as one of 444 municipalities in Ontario and 3,573 in Canada, effective GR is critical.
- The goal of GR is to ensure Niagara Region's priorities are reflected in policy, program and funding decisions made by the Government of Ontario and Government of Canada.
- The Region's GR activities have proven effective, securing key commitments from the province including support for GO expansion, housing and homelessness, mental health and addictions, key regional servicing infrastructure, and transit.
- In 2024, the Region participated in eleven (11) corporate GR activities which included joint advocacy initiatives with municipal partners to educate upper levels of government about sector specific challenges, as well as targeted campaigns focused on advancing Niagara-specific projects.
- Planned initiatives for 2025 include provincial and federal pre-budget submissions, election engagement, Niagara Week, Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference, Federal advocacy, joint advocacy with Regional peers and area municipalities.
- These activities will support advancing core projects related to Council's Strategic Priorities, including: an updated municipal funding model emphasizing the need for sustainable infrastructure funding, the South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution project, Consolidated Housing Master Plan Implementation, shared services and two-way, all day GO train service.

Financial Considerations

GR activities are accommodated within the 2024 operating budget and associated expenditures supported in-person advocacy initiatives including hosting Niagara Week and participation at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) conference. By participating in these in-person events, the Region was able to continue building positive intergovernmental relationships with upper levels of government. As highlighted under Key Facts, Niagara Region is one of 444 municipalities in Ontario and one of 3,573 municipalities in Canada, making consistent and frequent interactions with upper levels of government imperative to advancing Niagara's priorities.

Background

The federal and provincial governments are important partners in supporting growth and sustainability across Niagara. Numerous policy, program, and funding decisions made by upper levels of government influence the Region's ability to effectively deliver services that Niagara's residents and businesses rely on.

Corporate initiatives aim to strengthen the Region's intergovernmental relationships, while ensuring the following suite of GR functions are supported:

- **Educating** the public about Regional GR efforts and thought leadership.
- **Informing** staff and Council about provincial and federal policy changes.
- **Partnering** with local organizations, LAMs and other levels of government to advance shared priorities.
- **Advocating** for Regional priorities during annual and Niagara-specific events.

It is important to note that, throughout the year, departments request GR support for shorter-term initiatives, such as grant research or writing intergovernmental correspondence. Some Regional departments function as Consolidated Municipal Service Managers on behalf of the provincial government, so senior staff are in frequent communication with provincial counterparts to support, implement and enhance operations. Likewise, staff across all departments regularly engage with provincial counterparts to inform, influence and implement a range of policy, program and capital initiatives that serve to benefit Niagara Region and its priorities. While complementary to corporate GR initiatives and imperative to successful partnerships in service delivery, these efforts are not captured explicitly in this report.

Analysis

2024 Year End Review

Throughout 2024, considerable efforts were made to be proactive in the Region's GR approach to bolster Niagara's reputation, while demonstrating how increased provincial and federal partnership for Regional priorities will advance areas of mutual interest. Through consistent advocacy to upper levels of government a number of positive announcements were made in 2024 in support of Council's Strategic Priorities, validating the positioning and demonstrating traction the Region's GR efforts are having in successfully securing support from upper orders of government. Examples include:

- Reaffirmed commitment for the Grimsby GO station.
- Support for housing and homelessness initiatives, such as the Lions Douglas site.
- Additional supports for mental health and addictions services, including the recent HART Hub announcement.
- Introduction of the provincial Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program, which has provided support two (2) Regional infrastructure projects.
- Federal funding for Niagara Transit.

Below is a summary of the eleven (11) corporate GR activities that were undertaken throughout 2024. Activities have been categorized as either annual or Niagara-specific, with summaries detailing how each initiative supported core GR functions of educating, informing, partnering and/or advocating.

Annual Events

2024 Provincial Pre-budget Submission (January 31, 2024)

- Nine (9) requests were included within the submission. Each emphasized the need for greater provincial co-investment and partnership to support growth so Niagara can continue to be a top-tier destination for livability, investment and job creation. Participating in pre-budget consultations allowed the Region to introduce its 2024 priorities to the Government of Ontario.
- GR function supported: advocate.

2024 Federal Pre-Budget Submission (February 9, 2024)

- The submission expressed support for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Municipal Growth Framework, which requests that municipal revenue mechanisms be updated to reflect service demand, inflation and address the growing infrastructure gap. The South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution

project was highlighted as a core Niagara-specific priority. Participating in pre-budget consultations allowed the Region to introduce its 2024 priorities to the Government of Canada.

- GR function supported: advocate.

Analysis of Provincial and Federal Budgets (March 28 and April 11, 2024)

- As the core policy document for any government, the budget sets direction for an administration. Provincial and federal budgets typically detail new programs and services that will be introduced to support lower levels of government, businesses and residents. Council correspondence CWCD 2024-41 and CWCD 2024-58 provided analyses of the 2024 provincial and federal budgets and detailed potential impacts for Niagara.
- GR funding supported: inform.

Analysis of Bill 185, the *Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act* (April 12, 2024)

- CWCD 2024-53 provided an assessment of the bills four (4) pillars and detailed potential impacts on Development Charge collection, the Provincial Planning Statement and affordable housing-related exemptions and discounts if passed.
- GR funding supported: inform.

Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) Conference (August 18 – 21, 2024)

- AMO hosts an annual conference that provides members an opportunity to network with provincial officials and advocate for local priorities. Niagara Region participated in seven (7) delegations, allowing members of Council and senior staff to continue advocating for Niagara's core growth-related priorities.
- GR functions supported: advocate and partner.

Analysis of Provincial and Federal Fall Economic Statements (November 1 and December 20, 2024)

- Fall Economic Statements detail how provincial and federal governments allocated funding throughout the year and often announce new programs that were not included in the annual budget. Council correspondence CWCD 2024-186 and CWCD 2024-217 provided analyses of the 2024 Fall Economic Statements released by the Government of Ontario and Government of Canada, detailing potential impacts for Niagara.
- GR funding supported: inform.

Mayors and Regional Chairs of Ontario (January – December 2024)

- Mayors and Regional Chairs of Ontario (MARCO) supports local governments in advocating for policy and program changes at the provincial and federal level. In 2024, the Region participated in five (5) MARCO meetings and supported the hiring of an Executive Director to further enhance intergovernmental engagement on the group's behalf.
- GR function supported: partner, educate and advocate.

Niagara Specific Initiatives**Niagara Week (May 13 – 15, 2024)**

- Eight (8) in-person meetings were held with senior provincial leaders to discuss core growth-related Regional priorities, as approved by Council through report CAO 2-2024. Meeting outcomes included a reaffirmed commitment from the Premier for one-third funding for the South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution project predicated on federal partnership, as well as follow up discussions with Cabinet Ministers and senior staff regarding shared services and expansion of GO train service between Union Station and Niagara.
- GR functions supported: advocate, partner and educate.

Joint Regional Advocacy (July – December 2024)

- In partnership with the Regions of Durham, Halton, Peel, Waterloo and York, significant efforts were undertaken to educate the provincial and federal governments about the structures and functions of two-tier municipalities to enhance future program development. As the lead organization, Niagara oversaw the development of briefing material, organized joint meetings with three federal ministers in Q4 2024, and drafted a joint provincial pre-budget submission for the group's consideration.
- GR functions supported: partner, educate, advocate.

South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution (SNWTS) Project (January – December 2024)

- Significant work was undertaken in 2024 to secure funding from the provincial and federal governments for the SNWTS project. This included creating a business case that was shared with elected officials, securing letters of support from area municipalities and community organizations, working with FCM to showcase the project in the federation's Municipal Growth Framework paper, holding meetings with senior staff within the federal Ministry of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities,

Infrastructure Ontario and the Canada Infrastructure Bank, and exploring funding opportunities available through the Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund.

- GR function: advocate, partner.

Supporting Infrastructure Requirements for Asahi Kasei Site (August – December 2024)

- In partnership with the City of Port Colborne, a number of initiatives were undertaken to advocate that provincial and federal governments partner in the investment required to service the Asahi Kasei site. This included meeting with senior staff within Infrastructure Ontario and the Canada Infrastructure Bank, as well as hosting a roundtable with federal Ministers on November 14, 2024.
- GR function: advocate, partner.

2025 Initiatives

As a result of growth and changing community need, municipalities are experiencing an increase in demand for public services. However, base funding for municipal programs has not kept up with community need and inflation. Additionally, program areas traditionally within provincial and federal jurisdiction are being downloaded to municipalities without adequate financial assistance to deliver them, putting increased pressure on municipal revenue tools to cover these costs, as seen in the Region's 2025 budget deliberations. This concern will underpin all advocacy work in 2025.

In 2025, the Region will engage in the following GR activities to advance key priorities.

- Provincial and federal pre-budget submissions.
- Election engagement.
- Niagara Week.
- Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference.
- Federal advocacy.
- Joint advocacy with Regional peers and area municipalities.

These initiatives provide Niagara a platform to advocate that the provincial and federal governments update the municipal funding framework to reflect inflation and increased service demand and highlight ongoing pressures related to sustainable funding for infrastructure. As a long-term solution requiring significant program and policy changes from upper levels of government, this request will require a long-term advocacy approach both independently and in partnership with municipal counterparts and associations.

As advocacy for an updated municipal funding framework remains ongoing, this request will be foundational to all GR activities and will allow the Region to showcase Niagara-specific projects that require increased partnership and co-investment from upper levels of government as a result of inadequate municipal funding models. These core priorities include:

- The South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution Project.
- Consolidated Housing Master Plan Implementation.
- Shared service initiatives with Area Municipalities.
- Securing two-way, all day GO train service.

Given recent announcements related to some of these initiatives, in addition to the outcome of the provincial election, the positioning of these core priorities at Niagara Week will certainly shift to reflect the latest developments. This may also include different ways to reflect the Region's priorities to ensure relevance and effectiveness of advocacy for projects that are already familiar to the provincial government from previous advocacy engagements.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

2024 GR initiatives supported Council's 2023-2026 Strategic Priority of creating a Prosperous Region, Objective 4.4: Be and effective and unified voice to advocate with senior governments on behalf of Niagara.

Driving Council's Strategic Priorities requires coordinated, targeted and effective GR support on a number of fronts to achieve success. Nearly all of the actions listed in Council's Strategic Plan have some element of GR requirements. Niagara Region's robust GR presence with upper orders of government, both in partnership with our Area Municipalities and with our peer Regions (i.e., MARCO), enables the Region to not only leverage focus on Niagara-specific projects, but also drive larger policies and programs that are best influenced by a joint approach with other like-minded municipalities. This diverse approach allows Niagara to be effective on multiple fronts and target its investment of political and GR capital.

Other Pertinent Reports

- [CAO 2-2024 Niagara Week](https://pub-niagararegion.escibemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=35962) (https://pub-niagararegion.escibemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=35962)

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- [CWCD 2024-28 Niagara Week Update](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-march-08-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-march-08-2024.pdf>)
 - [CWCD 2024-41 Provincial Budget Analysis](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-march-29-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-march-29-2024.pdf>)
 - [CWCD 2024-53 Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-april-12-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-april-12-2024.pdf>)
 - [CWCD 2024-57 Government of Canada 2024 Budget Analysis](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-april-19-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-april-19-2024.pdf>)
 - [CWCD 2024-58 Advocacy Update](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-april-19-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-april-19-2024.pdf>)
 - [CAO 7-2024 Proposed Association of Municipalities of Ontario Conference Delegation Requests 2024](https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=37632) (<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=37632>)
 - [CHR 5-2024 Niagara Week 2024 Overview](https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=1018ecdf-0b7e-476b-a03f-955134c276e9&Agenda=Merged&lang=English) (<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=1018ecdf-0b7e-476b-a03f-955134c276e9&Agenda=Merged&lang=English>)
 - [CWCD 2024-141 AMO Conference 2024 Overview](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-aug-23-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-aug-23-2024.pdf>)
 - [CWCD 2024-186 2024 Province of Ontario Fall Economic Statement](https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-nov-01-2024.pdf)
(<https://www.niagararegion.ca/council/Council%20Documents/2024/council-correspondence-nov-01-2024.pdf>)

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