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**Subject:** Niagara Week 2025

**Report to:** Committee of the Whole

**Report date:** Thursday, March 6, 2025

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## **Recommendations**

1. That Report CAO 3-2025 **BE RECEIVED** for information.

## **Key Facts**

- The purpose of this report is to provide Council with information on Niagara Week, an upcoming provincial advocacy event the Region will be hosting at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario (Queen's Park) June 3-5, 2025, pending confirmation of the Legislative schedule post-election.
- Niagara Week is a Region-specific, well-known, focused advocacy tool that allows members of Council and senior staff to meet one-on-one with provincial leaders in targeted, in-depth meetings that highlight and promote Niagara-specific issues.
- Through constructive conversations, Council and senior staff are able to showcase core Regional priorities and identify specific projects that are ready for, or have benefitted from, provincial partnership and co-investment.
- The advocacy topics targeted for this event include a new municipal funding model, the South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution Project, Consolidated Housing Master Plan Implementation, Shared service initiatives with Area Municipalities, and Securing two-way, all day GO train service.
- An MPP reception will take place at the Ontario Legislature on June 4 at 5:00 p.m. allowing the Region to showcase Niagara to the province and provide a well-attended networking opportunity with numerous provincial officials.
- The Region will be working with the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce (GNCC) to showcase Niagara's economic potential, as local businesses will have the opportunity to network during the MPP reception and the GNCC will be engaging with ministerial representatives during the latter half of Niagara Week.

## **Financial Considerations**

The cost to host Niagara Week will be approximately \$40,000 and is accommodated in the operating budget. Expenses include the MPP reception, event materials and accommodations for staff and Councillors required to be in Toronto to participate in meetings for more than one day.

## **Background**

Niagara is continuously working to build positive intergovernmental relationships. Effective government relations allows the Region to respond to policy changes that impact municipal service delivery and budget planning. By increasing partnership with the Provincial and Federal governments, the Region can enhance programs and services delivered to residents.

Throughout 2025, the Region will engage in a number of advocacy opportunities to advance core and Niagara-specific priorities. Annual opportunities, such as engaging in provincial and federal pre-budget consultations and attending the annual Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) conference supports the Region in introducing its priorities to upper levels of government in Q1 while following up on provincial asks in Q3. Engaging in federal advocacy in Q4, participating in joint initiatives with Regional peers throughout the year and proactively building relationships with the provincial and federal governments post-election are other initiatives planned for the 2025 year.

Niagara Week is a Niagara-specific event that allows for one-on-one discussions focused on Regional initiatives. By hosting the event at Queen's Park, members of Council and senior staff can follow up on 2024 advocacy efforts and provide next steps regarding how our two levels of government can advance collective priorities. Niagara Week has been a targeted government relations tool that has become well-known at Queen's Park and has even been emulated by other municipalities. The investment of political and government relations capital via Niagara Week has proven to be an effective tool in highlighting Niagara's agenda and securing numerous commitments to policy, capital investment and program changes over its lifetime.

Highlights of commitments resulting directly from previous targeted advocacy efforts cut across all lines of Niagara Region's services and include funding for the Burgoyne Bridge, introduction of daily GO Train service, funding for the Niagara-on-the-Lake Wastewater Treatment Plant, funding and approvals for the Diverging Diamond at Glendale Avenue, and funding for Bridge Housing.

## **Niagara Week Attendance**

While not mandatory, all members of Regional Council are encouraged to attend the MPP reception on Wednesday, June 4. Members are asked to confirm their attendance with the Chair's Office.

To support in depth one-on-one discussions with senior members of Cabinet, the number of delegates will be limited. Councillors are asked to send an expression of interest to the Chair's Office; should a high number of Councillors wish to participate preference will be given to those who:

- Are Mayors of area municipalities impacted by advocacy requests.
- Are Chairs of Standing Committees that have a clear connection to the request.
- Are members of advocacy boards, such as AMO and/or the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM).

## **Analysis**

### **Minister Delegations**

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. For instance, the federal municipal funding model has not been updated since the 19th century nor the provincial model since 2008. While the Canada Community-Building Fund (previously Gas Tax Fund) was renewed for a 10-year period in 2024, and the province established New Deals with the City of Toronto and Ottawa in 2023 and 2024, outcomes do not accurately reflect the cost of inflation or rising service demand. They also do not apply to all Ontarian municipalities equally.

Additionally, program areas traditionally within provincial and federal jurisdiction are being downloaded to municipalities without adequate financial assistance to deliver them. For example, in 2022 Ontario's municipalities directly subsidized health services, housing, and family and social services via the municipal property tax levy by \$4 billion. This has put increased pressure on municipal revenue tools, as seen in the Region's 2025 budget deliberations.

An updated municipal funding model is a long-term solution that requires significant program and policy changes from upper levels of government. As a result, long-term advocacy, both independently and in partnership with municipal counterparts and associations, is needed. To support, a two-pronged approach will be taken for Niagara Week. The Region will be exploring opportunities to work in partnership with municipal

peers and community partners to highlight the impact underfunding has had on services and programs delivered by Regional municipalities. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Funding for Regional Police services.
- Funding for Public Health and social service programs.
- Long-term resources to address the complexities of mental health and addictions, and the homelessness crisis.
- Sustainable, predictable funding to support existing and net-new infrastructure assets.

As advocacy for an updated municipal funding framework remains ongoing, it is critical that Niagara Week also showcases Niagara-specific projects that require immediate partnership and co-investment from upper levels of government as a result of inadequate municipal funding models. To support, delegations with Cabinet Ministers will build upon established 2024 advocacy efforts to advance the Region's core priorities at the highest decision-making level at the province. The following selection criteria was considered when determining advocacy topics:

- Align with provincial priorities.
- Support ministry objectives.
- Have actionable solutions.
- Align with Council's Strategic Priorities.

Of note, the scope and recommended solutions for the primary advocacy areas detailed below are expected to be refined and enhanced over the coming months as staff prepare briefing materials for the event. Additionally, priorities may be subject to change based on provincial and/or federal announcements made prior to the event.

#### 1. South Niagara Wastewater Treatment Solution (SNWTS) Project

In May 2023 and 2024, the Premier committed, in principle, to providing one-third project funding predicated on the Government of Canada introducing an infrastructure program that would support a cost sharing structure with provincial and local governments. The 2024 Federal Budget announced a Canada Housing Infrastructure Fund (CHIF) to support growth-related infrastructure projects. While a welcomed investment, the financial benefit of potential funding received from the CHIF does not outweigh the financial impacts associated with program requirements as communicated in CSD 7-2025.

While staff remain hopeful that CHIF eligibility requirements may change in the future, advocacy work must continue for the SNWTS project. Niagara Week 2025 will allow the Region to update the province on its federal advocacy efforts and detail options for moving forward with this critical growth infrastructure project, particularly given the province's focus on building more homes.

**Request:** that the province provide one-third funding for the SNWTS project, irrespective of a matching federal commitment, and continue to advocate for a national infrastructure program that supports municipalities of all sizes.

**Applicable topics areas:** housing development, climate action, job creation, population and employment growth, support for health care infrastructure, wastewater servicing.

## 2. Niagara's Affordable Housing Strategy and Consolidated Housing Master Plan Implementation

Advocacy related to Niagara's Affordable Housing Strategy and Consolidated Housing Master Plan (CHMP) has taken place during annual and Niagara-specific events for a number of years. During Niagara Week 2024, Council and senior staff requested that the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) co-invest in the 320 Geneva Street, St. Catharines development project. While conversations were positive, ongoing negotiations between the Federal and Provincial government regarding the National Housing Strategy impacted solidifying next steps.

In August 2024, Councillors and senior staff presented MMAH with a portfolio of six shovel-ready projects during the AMO conference. An Affordable Housing Strategy and CHMP Implementation Plan has since been created detailing financial requirements and project timelines for NRH (re)development sites that staff feel add even more compelling and effective paths to partnership with the province. Niagara Week will allow the Region to update the province on progress made and re-emphasize that co-investment will support Ontario in meeting its housing targets.

**Request:** that the province co-invest in Niagara's Affordable Housing Strategy and CHMP so that shovel-ready projects can move forward without delay.

**Applicable topics areas:** housing development, job creation, employment growth, affordable and community housing, homelessness supports.

### 3. Shared Services

Council members and senior staff met with the Deputy Minister of Red Tape Reduction during Niagara Week 2024 to discuss large scale, region-wide initiatives that would benefit from provincial partnership. A priority of Niagara's Area CAOs as well, shared services cover numerous opportunities to enhance public services and delivery options for Niagara's municipalities, presenting a compelling and engaging partnership with the province. Meeting outcomes in 2024 were positive and resulted in follow up discussions with senior staff. Subsequent advocacy efforts during the 2024 AMO conference and 2025 pre-budget submission included requests that the province partner in two workplan items currently underway: a review of Emergency Management Organization functions and a Building Services Review. Niagara Week 2025 will support updates on Niagara-led initiatives, follow up on previous program requests, and provide an opportunity to share actionable next steps for provincial partnership to move these initiatives forward.

**Request:** that the province reintroduce the Municipal Modernization Program with a renewed focus on shared service implementation between two-tier municipalities.

**Applicable topics areas:** housing development, modernizing customer service, reducing duplication, emergency management, safe communities.

### 4. Two-way, all day GO Train Service

During Niagara Week 2024, members of Council and senior staff met with seven (7) provincial ministries to discuss the importance of introducing two-way, all day GO train service between Union Station and Niagara. Following delegations, Council passed a resolution reaffirming GO as a key advocacy priority and several follow up meetings were held with Cabinet ministers to discuss next steps. Advocacy on this file has been strong, unified, and robust, leading to recent commitments by the province to build the Grimsby GO station. This was also echoed by other parties during the provincial election campaign. Niagara Week 2025 presents a timely opportunity to continue conversations with the newly established government to further advance this project.

**Request:** that the province purchase the CN rail corridor used to deliver daily GO Train service, as an immediate means to delivering two-way, all-day GO train service between Union Station and Niagara.

**Applicable topics areas:** population and employment growth, climate action, tourism, post-secondary commuting, transportation, public infrastructure.

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## **Alternatives Reviewed**

Hosting Niagara Week in the fall 2025 was an alternative considered. While there are some benefits to a Q3 Niagara Week, such as greater certainty regarding when the Ontario Legislature will resume following the election, a spring timeline enhances the likelihood of positive impact and effectiveness and presents significant strategic benefit. The first 100 days following an election are pivotal from an advocacy perspective. It provides municipalities, associations and other interested parties an opportunity to influence government priorities prior to substantive policy or program decisions being introduced.

Should the results of the provincial election (i.e. change in government) or timelines set by the incoming government post-election (i.e. session dates for the Ontario Legislature) require a shift in Niagara Week, staff are prepared to pivot to ensure Niagara Week is responsive to the legislative environment and will update Council accordingly.

Additionally, amid ongoing tariff discussions, FCM and AMO are advocating that both levels of government provide municipalities with stimulus packages to ensure infrastructure and affordable housing projects continue to move forward. The focus of the proposed stimulus packages aligns with the delegation topics detailed above (i.e., SNWTS project and CHMP Implementation).

## **Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities**

Niagara week supports Council's 2023-2026 Strategic Priority of creating a Prosperous Region, Objective 4.4: Be an 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 levels 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 drives larger policies and programs that are best influenced by a joint approach with like-minded municipalities. This diverse approach including Niagara Week initiatives allow Niagara to be effective on multiple fronts and targets its investment of political and GR capital.

## **Next Steps**

Staff will continue to prepare for both the Niagara Week delegations and the associated reception. Staff will provide Council with further updates closer to the event and a briefing session will be scheduled in early May for Councillors and senior staff participating in delegations.

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