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## **2024 ROMA Conference: NOMA Discussed Issues Facing Northwestern Ontario**

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Thunder Bay, ON - Members of the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association (NOMA) Board joined more than 1,800 municipal leaders, government officials, elected officials, sponsors, exhibitors, and media at the 2024 Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) Conference January 21-23.

NOMA met with Provincial Ministers including Minister Calandra, Minister Sarkaria, Associate Minister Vijay Thanigasalam, Parliamentary Assistant (PA) Robin Martin and PA and MPP Kevin Holland, MPP Lise Vaugeois, numerous parliamentary staff, the Ontario Liberal Party and NDP to discuss various issues including Northern Ontario road safety, highway maintenance and rest stops, the ability for municipalities to retain surplus proceeds from tax sales, high costs associated with agency nurses and locums, and the NPI paper “Rural and Remote Physician Services Coordination in Northern Ontario” to discuss the RCCbc Rural governance model from BC as something Northern Ontario could implement to ease the pressure on health systems by attracting and retaining more physicians and healthcare workers.

NOMA, along with the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities, and the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association jointly shared the 3<sup>rd</sup> paper in the mental health, addictions, and homelessness crisis NPI series that looked at supporting new and existing housing first programs, providing long-term funding for capital repairs and community housing, and establishing mandated mobile crisis intervention teams throughout Northern Ontario. The paper presents numerous recommendations for government to undertake to address these issues in our communities.

NOMA asked the province to establish a plan to enhance safety standards on Northern roads including revising snow clearing standards to 8 hours, include more safety signs to slow down, more preventative anti-icing, and open more maintained year-round rest stops for truck drivers and other vehicles to access washroom facilities. We also encouraged government to review the recent survey findings from Ontario Trucking Association that outlined the primary concerns and possible solutions to address safety on Northern roads. NOMA appreciated the governments effort to move ahead with the 2+1 pilot project on Highway 11 and assured us that they investigate the issues outlined in our meeting.

NOMA requested the Provincial government to reinstate legislation permitting a municipality to retain surplus proceeds from tax sales.

Finally, NOMA outlined the urgent healthcare crisis in the North, the struggle to secure health care human resources across our region, and the exorbitant costs and issues associated with agency staff. Northwestern Ontario currently needs 77 family physicians and 55 specialists. We struggle to attract and retain the personal required. We asked government to work with health units, hospitals, NOSM University, and others to develop a recruitment and retention strategy of broad interprofessional health care teams and supportive services in Northern Ontario. The strategy should include incentives and programs for the north such as a living allowance and tuition reimbursement.

NOMA recommended further funding be allocated to explore the development of an organization for rural and Northern physicians services support that would parallel the highly successful model of the RCCbc. Additionally, we recommended Nurse Practitioner funding be revised and added to the base funding vs

having to wait 3 years to obtain. Lastly, until we remove our reliance on agency staff that are crippling hospital budgets, we asked for the government to support a regional locum model and fund 2 permanent physician and 2 nurse locums that are permanently located in Northwestern Ontario to move around as needed.

We were pleased to learn that though the Ministry changed the allocated physician spots for Red Lake and Atikokan un the Rural Northern Physician Group Agreement, we were assured that once they were able to fill the positions the funding would be reinstated.

NOMA was pleased to hear that Government is willing to work with us and we look forward to collaborating to address issues facing northwestern municipalities.

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