

The logo for Michael Coteau, featuring the name "MICHAEL" in bold black uppercase letters above "COTEAU" in bold red uppercase letters, all enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

16 August 2019

Mayor Jamie McGarvey
President, Association of Municipalities of Ontario
200 University Avenue, Suite 801
Toronto, Ontario M5H 3C6

Dear Mayor McGarvey:

I look forward once again to attending the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) conference to be held this weekend in Ottawa. As a Member of Provincial Parliament and former cabinet minister in six portfolios, I have always valued the opportunity to liaise with and hear first-hand from Ontario's municipal leaders on issues of mutual interest and concern.

At this year's conference, I hope to share with attendees my perspective on the need for significant change in the relationship between the province and Ontario municipalities. In recent years, the provincial-municipal relationship in Ontario has not kept pace with the reality of the role of today's municipalities in representing and serving Ontarians. A disconnect has developed between how municipalities function in today's Ontario, and how the province views and engages with its municipal counterparts.

I believe the direction that offers the best prospect for improvement is a comprehensive review of municipal governance in Ontario aimed at aligning practice with reality, and taking a forward-looking view to anticipate further change and prepare municipalities to better meet Ontarians' future needs.

The time has come for the province and municipalities to fundamentally rethink our relationship and collaborate to empower municipalities—as the level of government closest to Ontarians—to best serve the public, observe fiscal responsibility and effectively deliver the services that will support our future economy while creating healthy, sustainable communities.

Within the framework of a broader modernization of government in Ontario, we must plan now to work together in a new evaluation of how our municipalities serve people. We should approach this opportunity with fresh perspectives and openness to change.

I am particularly interested to discuss with AMO members how Ontario can work with its municipal partners to identify and capitalize on opportunities the future economy presents; ensure inclusion of all Ontarians and meet the unique needs of rural and Northern communities; plan and implement education and training geared to meeting the needs and opportunities of tomorrow's workforce; and, preserve and protect our environment to combat the climate crisis.

As opportunities may present this weekend, I would look forward to discussing three specific themes with you and your colleagues:

1. A Fresh Relationship

The notion that Ontario's municipalities are "creatures of the province" is simply antiquated. A paternalistic approach to municipal relations is not appropriate or supported by a real-world understanding of how constructive engagement and good governance are to be achieved. While AMO has undertaken to liaise with the current government in good faith and work on improving the relationship, actions taken by the Ford government to date have been disappointing and even alarming, including: arbitrary cancellation of regional chair elections, interference in Toronto's elections mid-campaign and an opaque and intimidating Regional Governance Review.

Ontario needs to replace this combative, us-against-them dynamic with a fresh relationship that engages municipalities as equal partners, characterized by mutual respect, true consultation, openness and transparency. Mechanisms for working toward this relationship form the second and third themes I hope to discuss.

2. Reassessing "Who Does What?"

The current government's Regional Governance Review examines municipal and regional boundaries and the nature of representation in some Ontario jurisdictions, with some consideration of the segmentation of service provision between upper- and lower-tier municipal bodies. But this review, with its limited scope and prioritization of "lines on the map" and the number of councillors, is insufficient to modernize our municipal and regional governance.

The urgent need today is for a clear-eyed examination and analysis of the provision of services by municipal governments, maturing beyond questions of uploading or downloading costs and instead focusing on the goal of putting local control back into local hands, where connection with and understanding of the needs of people and their local communities is strongest and most grounded in real-world experience.

I propose this process take the form of an expert-led consultation on "Who Does What?" undertaken jointly by nominees appointed by AMO and the province. The scope of study should focus on how, where and by whom services are provided and could be provided to improve efficiency and effectiveness; include examination of revenue streams for municipalities beyond reliance on provincial transfers; and look closely at specific processes including the land-use planning system.

3. Charter Cities

I propose that Ontario and AMO collaborate to create "Charter Cities" in Ontario. Five Charter Cities currently exist in Canada, but none in Ontario, with the *City of Toronto Act 2006* representing a part-measure that provides that city with additional powers but falls short of what a true Charter City would possess. The intent of a move toward Charter Cities in Ontario would be to better reflect current reality and recognize and embrace the vectors of future trends to ensure that Ontario's large urban municipalities are equipped to manage their continued growth and change.

Within the context of the “Who Does What?” study, the province and AMO should undertake to look openly at options to devolve responsibility for various governance matters—including land-use planning, revenue and legislative authority—to our large urban municipalities.

AMO’s discussions this weekend come at a crucial juncture for Ontario. As our economy changes, and being mindful of the threats posed by the climate crisis, I believe we need to be bold and confident in our commitment to modernize Ontario’s governance and bring forward creative and innovative solutions that advance our shared goals of delivering for Ontario’s children and families.

Ontario must welcome its municipalities to the table as equal partners with the province in seeking the way forward side-by-side. I propose the measures I’ve detailed here as a New Deal for Ontario’s Municipalities that affirms their status, capacities and responsibilities and recognizes the reality of their role in serving Ontarians today and in the future.

I look forward to discussing these and other matters at the conference and I would be happy to meet with you to discuss these proposals further.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MC', written in a cursive style.

Michael Coteau
MPP, Don Valley East

cc Mayor Cam Guthrie
Chair of the Large Urban Mayors Caucus of Ontario