SMART GROWTH SYMPOSIUM

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO | Lawson Climate Institute

ontario chamber of commerce

SUMMARY REPORT: FOSTERING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE THROUGH INNOVATION

2025 SMART GROWTH SYMPOSIUM

This report synthesizes key takeaways from the 2025 Smart Growth Symposium, co-hosted by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) and the Lawson Climate Institute (formerly the Climate Positive Energy Initiative). The event brought together leaders from industry, academia, and government to explore strategies for sustainable growth in Ontario.

Through the Table Talk series, focused on innovation and sustainability, participants exchanged ideas and identified opportunities to strengthen Ontario's path to smart, inclusive growth. Discussions covered a range of priorities, including energy grids, critical minerals, digital infrastructure, workforce development, green building, agrifood sustainability, sustainable finance, smart mobility and overall business competitiveness.

The Ontario Chamber and Lawson Climate Institute share a commitment to fostering innovation as a cornerstone to Ontario's sustainable and inclusive economic future.

ONTARIO'S ENERGY GRIDS – A CLEAN ENERGY ADVANTAGE

Ontario's clean, reliable, and diverse energy grid is recognized globally as a benchmark for sustainability. As demand rises with electrification and population growth, the province must continue to strike a balance between reliability, affordability, and sustainability.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** Ontario's clean grid supports decarbonization and industrial growth through strong collaboration among utilities, government, and industry.
- **Challenges:** Aging infrastructure, lengthy permitting processes, and regional inequities, particularly in rural, northern, and Indigenous communities, limit capacity.
- **A roadmap ahead:** Accelerating grid modernization, expanding transmission, and streamlining approvals through coordinated action will ensure reliable and equitable access to low-carbon power.

CRITICAL MINERALS AND SUPPLY CHAINS – UNLOCKING MINING EXCELLENCE

Ontario's rich critical mineral deposits position the province at the forefront of clean technology, advanced manufacturing, and the low-carbon economy. As global demand for responsibly sourced materials grows, Ontario has a strategic opportunity to strengthen its mining-to-manufacturing value chain and reinforce its leadership in sustainable resource development.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** Ontario is emerging as a global leader in critical minerals, supported by abundant resources, skilled labour, and integrated EV supply chain development.
- **Challenges:** Infrastructure gaps in northern Ontario, permitting delays, and limited domestic processing capacity constrain growth and value-added opportunities.
- **A roadmap ahead:** Investing in northern infrastructure, expanding refining and recycling capacity, aligning workforce strategies, partnering with Indigenous communities, and deepening interprovincial and cross-border trade will unlock Ontario's full potential.

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND INDUSTRIALIZATION – A DATA-DRIVEN FUTURE

Ontario's digital transformation is reshaping industries and communities, driving decarbonization, operational efficiency and resilience through technologies such as AI, digital twinning, smart grids, and Industry 5.0+.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** Strategic investments are enabling smarter manufacturing, AI-powered logistics, and data-driven innovation, boosting productivity and competitiveness.
- **Challenges:** Limited broadband access, cybersecurity risks, and funding gaps for digital skills hinder adoption and innovation, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- **A roadmap ahead:** Expanding broadband and 5G, enhancing digital literacy, fortifying cybersecurity, and fostering cross-sector collaboration will build a reliable, inclusive, and future-ready digital economy.

FUTURE-READY WORKFORCE – DELIVERING FOR THE DEMANDS OF TOMORROW

Ontario's workforce is crucial to building a resilient and innovative economy. As industries evolve with digital and green technologies, strategic partnerships across education, industry, and government are essential to equip workers with future-ready skills and unlock emerging job opportunities.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** Despite funding pressures, post-secondary institutions are developing innovative training models, including micro-credentials, apprenticeships, and experiential learning, that support transitions into clean tech and digital careers.
- **Challenges:** Persistent labour shortages in skilled trades and technical roles remain a significant bottleneck.
- **A roadmap ahead:** Aligning curriculum with labour market needs, expanding reskilling and apprenticeship programs, and building inclusive pathways into high-growth sectors to strengthen its talent pipeline.

BUILDING GREEN – SMART AND SUSTAINABLE CITIES

Ontario's future depends on resilient, sustainable infrastructure that supports affordability, climate adaptation, and innovation. From housing to public spaces, integrating green design and community collaboration is needed to build livable, competitive cities.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** The construction and building sectors are increasingly adopting low-carbon technologies (e.g., heat pumps), sustainable materials and energy-efficient designs (e.g., net-zero buildings).
- **Challenges:** High upfront costs, complex regulations, and inconsistent green standards across municipalities slow adoption and innovation.
- **A roadmap ahead:** Expanding incentives for retrofits and green design, standardizing sustainability requirements, and expanding training for green construction trades can accelerate Ontario's leadership in smart, sustainable urban development.

AGRIFOOD SECTOR AND SUSTAINABILITY – SEEDING A GREEN ECONOMY

Ontario's agrifood sector is evolving to meet environmental and economic demands through agritech innovation, sustainable practices, and stronger farm-to-table connections. These efforts are key to building a resilient, competitive, and low-carbon food system.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** The sector is advancing in sustainable production, waste reduction, and local sourcing. Innovations such as robotics in dairy production and data-driven farming, are improving efficiency and enhancing food security.
- **Challenges:** Rising input costs, labour shortages, and uneven access to sustainable technologies, especially for smaller farms, threaten long-term viability.
- **A roadmap ahead:** A long-term growth strategy focused on equipping the next generation of farmers with tools, training, and resources will drive innovation and resilience across Ontario's agrifood system.

SMART AND SUSTAINABLE FINANCE – ENABLING A CLIMATE RESILIENT TRANSITION

Finance is a catalyst for a low-carbon transition. With tools such as green bonds, guidelines, and data-driven investment frameworks, capital markets are evolving to support climate resilience and sustainable innovation.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** Businesses and financial institutions are increasingly adopting sustainable finance tools such as green bonds, impact investing, and disclosure frameworks, to align with climate goals and drive Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) outcomes.
- **Challenges:** Canada lags behind its global peers in developing clear sustainability investment guidelines and disclosure standards, which limits access to affordable capital and guidance for SMEs.
- **A roadmap ahead:** Establishing a national sustainable finance framework with metrics will unlock green investment, support SME transitions, and strengthen Canada's position in the global green economy.

SMART MOBILITY – DRIVING SUSTAINABILITY IN ONTARIO

The province has a unique opportunity to modernize its transportation systems, reducing emissions, improving accessibility, and strengthening supply chains. Smart mobility solutions are transforming how people and goods move, creating cleaner, faster, and more connected corridors.

Key Takeaways:

- **Opportunities:** Progress in transit electrification and smart mobility technology is accelerating decarbonization. Collaboration among municipalities, automakers, and logistics firms is expanding consumer access and infrastructure.
- **Challenges:** EV infrastructure remains unevenly distributed, and supply chain constraints, regulatory uncertainty, and interoperability issues slow broader adoption.
- **A roadmap ahead:** Expanding EV and hydrogen fueling networks, harmonizing regional policies, and promoting data sharing among mobility providers will drive Ontario's smart mobility future.

Ontario's business community is at the heart of the province's smart growth strategy. As companies integrate sustainability into their operations, they drive clean innovation, enhance productivity, and build resilience.

Yet, fragmented incentives, regulatory complexity, and commercialization barriers continue to hinder progress, underscoring the urgent need to equip SMEs with targeted support, clear guidance, and accessible capital to fully participate in Ontario's decarbonization journey. These efforts will position Ontario as a global leader in sustainable business competitiveness and inclusive economic growth.