

# ADVANCING COMMUNITY PROSPERITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

*A Strategic Roadmap from the Inaugural CEO Forum*

## ABOUT THE ONTARIO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is the indispensable partner of business and Canada's largest, most influential provincial chamber. It is an independent, non-profit advocacy and member services organization representing a diverse network of 60,000 members. The OCC convenes, mobilizes and empowers businesses and local chambers in pursuit of its purpose: to bring inclusive and sustainable prosperity to Ontario's businesses, workers, and communities.

Ontario is navigating a confluence of internal and external pressures that will define the province's economic trajectory for years to come. Stagnant productivity, uncompetitive and unpredictable approval processes, and the visible decline of downtown cores and 'main streets.' Over the past year, U.S.-Canada trade disruptions have compounded these pressures, creating heightened uncertainty for businesses across Ontario.

Against this backdrop, the OCC and Level5 Strategy (L5) convened a group of CEOs, presidents and country leaders from some of the largest businesses in Ontario for a candid dialogue about how major businesses can use their reach, resources, and values-driven responsibility to advance community prosperity across Ontario.

The meeting included C-suite executives from many sectors, including:

- Financial services and insurance
- Pension funds
- Energy
- Construction
- Technology
- Telecommunications
- Professional services

The OCC's economic agenda-centred on a competitive business environment, qualified and diverse talent, healthy and sustainable communities, and growth-enabling infrastructure provided the structural frame for this discussion.

## INTENDED OUTCOMES

The forum was guided by three shared objectives:

- Build a shared understanding of leading practices among major Ontario employers to empower communities and generate shared prosperity.
- Identify opportunities to scale successful approaches through collaboration between businesses, governments, and community service providers.
- Develop pathways for future business leadership in Ontario communities through dialogue, experience-sharing and collective problem-solving.

## THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF PLACE AND PROSPERITY

The discussion opened with a clear premise: communities thrive when businesses thrive. Across Canada, 52 downtowns show clear signs of decline, reflecting a broader pattern in which reduced business activity and growing income inequality erodes economic vitality and exacerbates social challenges. Since 90% of Canadians live in urban areas, this has deep implications for the economy.

In Ontario, where 40% of the country's population resides, issues such as homelessness, safety, mental health concerns, substance use disorders, and weakened downtown cores are not separate from this trend but are deeply connected to it. Forum participants reflected on the barriers constraining community prosperity—and the conditions required to restore it—recognizing that economic and social outcomes are inseparable.

Participants recognized that the scale and complexity of these challenges exceed the capacity of any single institution. A new model of collective leadership is required—one that brings together business, government, and community actors as co-designers of local solutions.



# FOUR STRATEGIC THEMES FOR ACTION

## 1. Collaboration Through Collective Leadership

Participants emphasized that Ontario's current challenges, from housing affordability to productivity to global competitiveness, cannot be addressed through siloed action. Businesses increasingly see themselves not only as employers and investors, but also as regional economic anchors with a responsibility to provide long-term, place-based leadership in collaboration with Ontario's network of chambers of commerce and local community leaders.

There was strong alignment around the need for new models of collaboration, with businesses working alongside governments and community organizations to design and scale solutions that drive local economic growth, increase labour force participation, and improve health outcomes, rather than waiting for top-down policy responses.

### What we believe can work:

- Leveraging the OCC's network of 140+ chambers and 60,000 local businesses as a platform for cross-sector collaboration and experience-sharing.
- Creating structured forums for ongoing CEO-level dialogue focused on shared challenges and scalable solutions.
- Strengthening partnerships between major employers, local institutions, and governments to co-design community-level initiatives.
- Understanding and emulating successful behaviours and collaboration models from other jurisdictions.

## 2. Restoring Competitive Agility and Productivity

A recurring theme was the urgency of restoring Ontario's competitive agility and productivity. Participants expressed concern that sluggish productivity growth, policy volatility, and slow approval processes are constraining investment and undermining confidence, particularly at a moment when global competition for capital and talent is intensifying.

One core challenge is developing local talent. While governments play a critical role in enabling growth, participants highlighted the central leadership role of businesses in training more talent locally.

Participants also emphasized that productivity growth must be supported through incentives that enable businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to invest in technology, upskilling and process improvements that enhance competitiveness and resilience.

### What we believe can work:

- Advocating for faster, more predictable regulation and approvals to improve Ontario's investment climate, without compromising health, safety or environmental standards.
- Aligning public policy incentives with productivity-enhancing investments by business.

- Supporting models that strengthen economic sovereignty and supply chain resilience in a volatile global environment.
- Equipping communities, businesses and individuals with practical strategies to deal with the mental health crisis, and providing the safety, financial means and well-being required to thrive in uncertain times.
- Strengthening collaboration between governments, educational institutions and employers to develop local talent, including immigrant and Indigenous talent, and to provide local young people with work-integrated learning opportunities close to home.

### **3. Investing in Local Greatness**

The concept of investing in local greatness emerged as a throughline of the discussion, reflecting the need to drive capital and business opportunity to local entrepreneurs and industries. Participants widely agreed that long-term prosperity depends on the strength of Ontario's local businesses, entrepreneurs, talent, and places. Economic growth that is not anchored in strong local ecosystems was viewed as fragile and unsustainable.

Leaders highlighted the importance of supporting Canadian suppliers and domestic SMEs—not as protectionism, but as strategic investment in resilience, reliability, and long-term competitiveness. Favouring local procurement where feasible, particularly in business-to-business contexts, was seen as a practical way to embed economic value within communities.

Participants also emphasized the role of productivity and workforce resilience in sustaining local greatness. Businesses that are equipped to innovate, adapt, and compete globally are better positioned to reinvest locally, retain talent, and contribute to vibrant communities.

#### **What we believe can work:**

- Elevating and amplifying made-in-Ontario success stories through the chamber network.
- Strengthening local supply chains to scale new homegrown champions, leveraging the purchasing power of government and established Ontario businesses.
- Supporting succession planning, employee ownership, and other models that preserve locally rooted businesses while empowering communities to drive the success of their local champions.
- Working with provincial and local economic development leaders to reduce barriers to private investment in Ontario communities.

### **4. Connectivity as the Gateway to Growth**

Connectivity—including transportation infrastructure, digital connectivity, and integrated energy planning—was identified as a foundational enabler of economic growth and community resilience. Participants noted that uneven access to reliable and affordable connectivity continues to constrain investment and limit opportunities across Ontario, particularly in remote, Northern, and Indigenous communities.

Digital infrastructure, particularly broadband and fibre connectivity, was cited as a critical determinant of a community's ability to attract investment, support remote and hybrid work, and enable SMEs to compete in increasingly digital markets. These gaps were viewed not only as technological challenges, but also as competitiveness and equity issues.

Energy systems were similarly framed as essential infrastructure for growth. As economic activity becomes more data and energy-intensive, dependable and scalable energy capacity is increasingly a prerequisite for investment. Where access is constrained, uncertain, or where insufficient planning coordination creates frequent disruption to businesses, capital is delayed or redirected elsewhere.

### **What we believe can work:**

- Accelerating investments in digital, energy, and transportation infrastructure to unlock regional growth.
- Aligning infrastructure planning, and funding, with long-term economic and productivity objectives.
- Treating broadband, energy and local connectivity as core competitiveness assets, augmenting their ability to enable local prosperity in accordance with the specific needs and planning choices of communities.

## **CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS**

The inaugural CEO Forum underscored a shared recognition: the conditions facing Ontario's downtowns, communities, workforce, and global competitiveness are too complex for any single organization to address alone.

Strengthening community prosperity requires deep collaboration between business leaders, community partners, and regional institutions, including governments at all levels. This forum marks the beginning of ongoing conversation and collaboration between Ontario's most influential employers to shape a more inclusive and sustainable future for our province's businesses, workers, and communities.