

Eastern Ontario Warden's Caucus: Building the Network



(EOWC, 2012)

Eastern Ontario is a diverse region spanning over 49,000 square kilometers encompassing varied lower and upper tier municipalities¹, cultures and landscapes (EOWC, 2007a). One would assume in such a widespread region that a culture of collaboration and an air of solidarity would be nearly impossible. However, it is evident in Eastern Ontario, especially concerning economic development that collaboration has served as a viable option for pooling resources and pursuing opportunities in the region that would not have been possible on an individual municipal basis (MEDT, 2009).

The Eastern Ontario Wardens Caucus is an example of regional innovation, with the creation of a regional governmental structure and forum for fostering collaborations. The origins of the EOWC go back as early as 1996 when quarterly meetings of County CAOs were regularly held, as social events, for networking, and information purposes. However, with the advent of the Harris provincial government and the rapid and widespread amalgamations and downloading from the province to municipal governments, a sense of urgency amongst municipal governments was felt. The aggressive local government restructuring created a climate of common concern and unity across Eastern Ontario's upper tier municipalities. By 1998, there were considerable concerns regarding the fiscal viability of municipalities in this new political climate. Monthly meetings of Eastern Ontario wardens were instituted by the wardens themselves. A founding member and former chair of this group was Jim Pine who was with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing in 1998 and is now the CAO of Hastings County. He, amongst others, pressed for a positive re-structuring of the region's counties. By 2001/02 the EOWC had regrouped and was addressing the new conditions faced by the region as well as exploring future opportunities to strengthen Eastern Ontario as a whole (EOWC, 2012).

The EOWC is now a group of eleven Eastern Ontario Counties and two single-tier municipalities, working in conjunction with provincial and federal governments in promoting the Eastern Ontario region and focusing on mutually agreed upon strategic priorities each year. The EOWC engages with local politicians and residents to foster cooperation at all

¹ Upper tier municipalities refer to the counties that are made up of smaller local (lower) level municipalities

levels of government in order to achieve their strategic priorities. The current priorities of the EOWC are: the improvement of infrastructure such as roads and bridges; regional economic development; and ensuring equitable allocations of provincial funding for programs downloaded to municipal governments (EOWC, 2007a). The biggest notable success to date of the EOWC was the lobbying for high speed internet throughout Eastern Ontario and the subsequent creation of the Eastern Ontario Regional Network (EORN). This reflects the EOWC's goal of transitioning to a more knowledge based economy in rural areas, and enhancing the retention of human capital through the nurturing of learning and innovation (EOWC, 2007b).

This group is worth highlighting as they represent a self-organized level of government, focused on creating a regional voice and representation. This was a decision that came from the local governments as they realized the political and financial value of thinking regionally. As Eastern Ontario does not have an official regional plan this group is important for providing consistency in decision making and a common vision for Eastern Ontario as a region. One of the EOWC's strategic priorities is to build upon the strengths in Eastern Ontario to become a strong force in the Ontario economy (EOWC, 2007b). This is exemplified in the organizations Eastern Ontario Prosperity Plan (2007) which was written to "...identify issues which must be addressed in the region to capitalize on the regions potential" (EOWC, 2007b, p. 2). This Eastern Ontario Prosperity Plan uses place based approaches towards asset building to develop existing resources in the region. Another strategic priority of this group has been finding urban and rural linkages and ways in which these two areas can help each other (EOWC, 2007b). These approaches arguably exemplify regional development approaches as referred to in the New Regionalism theoretical approach.

As the EOWC works towards their current priorities they aim to eventually come out with a regional all encompassing plan. According to representatives, this region wide growth plan design is currently in an unofficial exploration stage, but is expected to become a greater priority in the coming years.

Visit the EOWC for further information and resources: <http://www.eowc.org>.

References

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