

Vote for a Prosperous Niagara

The 2018 Provincial Election Platform of
Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce

ABOUT THE GNCC

The GNCC is dedicated to the success of business and organizations in order to ensure the long-term prosperity of the Niagara region.

Our values are to be collaborative, self-sustaining, courageous, forward-thinking, passionate, and strictly non-partisan. In the spirit of our values, we offer these comments in anticipation of the 2018 provincial elections outlining the policies we believe will help shape a prosperous Niagara and an Ontario that works for everyone.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce (GNCC) has a mission to support the long-term prosperity of Niagara by enabling the success of its businesses and organizations. Through consultation with our members and with the Chamber network across Ontario, we have developed this platform which we believe will help the next Government of Ontario to build a prosperous Niagara.

Our businesses are the backbone of our economy and our communities. To ensure the next provincial election addresses the most important issues to their survival, we have identified four fundamental pillars of a strong Ontario:

- Strengthening Business Competitiveness
- Fostering Job Creation
- Building Healthy Communities
- Improving Government Accountability

Under each of these four pillars, we have identified several policy recommendations that will help bolster Ontario's long-term economic outcomes, while also addressing the pressing issues of today.

SUMMARY

PILLARS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>1. STRENGTHENING BUSINESS COMPETITIVENESS</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commit to funding daily year-round GO train service to Niagara and a single public transit system for the region. 2. Conduct and publish the results of a comprehensive review of the electricity sector, including an objective economic impact analysis assessing the full range of inputs that make up the Global Adjustment, and then pursue cost-reducing measures based on the results. 3. Modernize inter-provincial trade. 4. Regardless of public policy approach chosen, pursue efforts to reduce Ontario's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in a manner that effectively mitigates risk to business competitiveness. 5. Work with federal and local levels of government to establish a publicly available analysis of the cost of doing business (CODB) in Ontario. 6. Reinstate small business exemptions to new labour law provisions.
<p>2. FOSTERING JOB CREATION</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Modernize the apprenticeship system. 2. Ensure client-centric Employment Ontario services. 3. Work with industry and post-secondary institutions to ensure that program offerings remain responsive to changing labour market dynamics and the regional and sectoral needs of Ontario's business community. 4. Allocate resources to focus support on high growth firms and those with high growth potential by delaying taxation on corporate income growth to overcome Ontario's scale-up challenge.
<p>3. BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Construct a new hospital in Niagara Falls and keep the Welland hospital site open. 2. Fund more affordable housing and investigate new solutions to the affordable housing crisis. 3. Focus on strategic growth policies by ensuring that land use planning and development regulations are aligned, to increase density and create more housing stock. 4. Build adaptable and resilient infrastructure stock to address future pressures including climate change and demographic shifts. 5. Expand mental healthcare. 6. Review all social services and programs; treat social services as an interconnected system.
<p>4. IMPROVE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a meaningful plan to tackle the debt and move towards balanced or surplus budgets. 2. Ensure all proposed policy, regulation and legislation has been evaluated against sound, quantitative evidence. 3. Establish criteria for measuring progress toward the attainment of strategic goals and publicly publish these targets to ensure transparency. 4. Provide appropriate timelines to stakeholders when revising or implementing initiatives that will impact their operations. 5. Review transfers of responsibilities between the provincial and municipal governments to improve efficiency, service delivery, and cost.

INTRODUCTION

The 2018 Ontario election comes at a pivotal time for the province. Viewing Ontario's economy from afar, the story appears to be a positive one: over the 2014-16 period, Ontario's real GDP growth outpaced that of all G7 countries;¹ in August 2017, Ontario's unemployment rate of 6.2 per cent was below the national average for the 29th consecutive month.

However, Ontario has been increasingly reliant on housing to sustain economic growth. The soaring price of housing has contributed 29 per cent of nominal GDP growth over the past four quarters (1.1 percentage points to nominal GDP growth), well above its 7.8 per cent share of GDP in 2015 and historic levels generally.² In Niagara, we have seen substantial growth in housing prices. The median price of a single detached home has increased from under \$150,000 in 2003 to over \$350,000 in 2017.³ A report from the National Bank of Canada stated that Niagara's increased economic performance was almost entirely due to house price increases.⁴

With the upcoming 32 per cent increase to the minimum wage, Ontario will soon have a minimum-to-median wage ratio that is higher than all other Canadian provinces, as well as our competitor jurisdictions in the United States.⁵ Furthermore, while our unemployment rate continues to outpace the G7, Statistics Canada attributes this trend primarily to a decline in the number of youth searching for work.⁶ The labour force participation rate among those aged 20 to 24 dropped from 79 per cent in 2004 to 75.5 per cent in April 2017.

Ontarians are troubled by today's economic realities. Over half believe that the next generation will not have a better standard of living as compared to their own.⁷ Similarly, only one third think young Ontarians are well prepared for the jobs of the future. They are also more likely to say that the Ontario economy is struggling to change with the times than to say we already are, or are becoming, an economy of the future.⁸

Amidst these concerns, however, Ontario has the potential to leverage its existing strengths and forge a path forward. No government can afford to coast on previous successes or ignore potential threats. It is imperative that any government leave a long-term vision for the prosperity of the province. That vision will require deep thinking on some very difficult questions. As we rapidly move toward a technology-driven knowledge economy, what is our competitive advantage? What is the future source of Ontario's prosperity?

The GNCC encourages all candidates and parties to consider these questions, and offers these policy proposals in the hope that it will help the next Government of Ontario to shape policies which will build prosperity, encourage growth, create jobs, and build a prosperous Niagara.

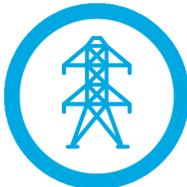
STRENGTHENING BUSINESS COMPETITIVENESS

CHALLENGES

The most common and acute concern of the business community in Ontario is rising input costs, especially those costs deriving from government regulation and policy. As operating a business becomes more difficult and more expensive, the ability of businesses to compete is limited. Although Ontario is still a competitive environment in which to do business, there is a real sentiment among businesses that the advantages which created this are being eroded, and other jurisdictions in Canada and the world are working towards lowering the cost of doing business and making themselves more competitive.

The next Government of Ontario must plan and act to preserve and enhance our business competitiveness if we are to preserve the prosperity we have built and ensure that our economic future remains bright.

Energy /
Electricity
Costs



Ontario's electricity prices have risen by 71 per cent from 2008 to 2016, far outpacing electricity price growth in other provinces, as well as increases in income and inflation.⁹

Regulations
& Red Tape



Overregulation imposes the equivalent of an additional 5% to 15% import tariff on small businesses compared to larger firms, due to small firms' inability to appropriately navigate the regulatory environment.¹⁰ With 380,000 regulations (by the government's own count), Ontario is the most administered province in the country, harming business competitiveness.¹¹

Cap &
Trade



In Ontario, 32 per cent of businesses believe that cap and trade costs in 2017-2018 will have a negative impact on their business, limiting their ability to hire new workers and/or scale up.¹²

OUR PRIORITIES

To strengthen business competitiveness, the GNCC encourages the next government of Ontario to:

1. Commit to funding daily year-round GO train service to Niagara and a single public transit system for the Niagara region.

The economic benefits of GO Train service include 2,400 new full-time jobs in Niagara, 1,200 additional construction jobs, and \$195 million in economic impact for a total estimated cost of \$130 million.¹³ The Government of Ontario has also committed \$67 million over 10 years for transit in Niagara, along with \$81.3 million in federal funding.¹⁴ This will help Niagara modernize and integrate its many public transit systems and will be a major boost not only for business but for poverty reduction and standards of living. The next Government of Ontario should deliver on these commitments.

2. Conduct and publish the results of a comprehensive review of the electricity sector, including an objective economic impact analysis assessing the full range of inputs that make up the Global Adjustment (GA), and then pursue cost-reducing measures based on the results.

Ontarians deserve a comprehensive, objective analysis of the drivers behind all electricity system costs, including the GA. Government should then consider approaches to make sustainable changes to the electricity market.

3. Modernize inter-provincial trade.

The recent Supreme Court of Canada decision on inter-provincial trade has highlighted the need to modernize the inter-provincial trade system in Canada, particularly around alcoholic beverages. The Canadian Free Trade Agreement encourages further liberalizing the trade in alcohol, and the GNCC encourages the next Government of Ontario to work with the other provinces in a serious attempt at liberalizing the alcohol trade in Canada.

4. Regardless of public policy approach chosen, pursue efforts to reduce Ontario's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in a manner that effectively mitigates risk to business competitiveness.

Tackling GHG emissions and climate change is critical to the sustainability of our very civilization. Government led approaches to reducing Ontario-produced GHGs should come with adequate implementation time for the research and development of new technologies to support the on-going transition to the low-carbon economy, and must include appropriate offsets to safeguard business competitiveness.

These could include, but are not limited to, ensuring that exposed industries are supported in the process of developing techniques for meeting emissions targets, and investing in those regional economies that are uniquely impacted by this new approach.

5. Work with federal and local levels of government to establish a publicly available analysis of the cost of doing business (CODB) in Ontario.

This analysis should aggregate all government-induced input costs by sector, with the results published publicly. It would be updated annually to highlight the cumulative impact of any new government policies implemented in the past year or proposed in the year ahead. Importantly, this analysis would be benchmarked against an aggregated CODB metric in comparator jurisdictions.

6. Reinstate small business exemptions to new labour law provisions.

New legislation around paid emergency leave, shift changes, staffing laws etc. are hard to bear for small businesses. 97.8 per cent of Niagara businesses are small- or micro-businesses, and more than half have fewer than 5 employees.¹⁵ Small business exemptions existed precisely because so many of these businesses do not have the resources or flexibility to meet these requirements and remain competitive. Ontario should reinstate the small business labour law exemptions which existed before 2017.

FOSTERING JOB CREATION

CHALLENGES

A robust labour market is essential to the continued global competitiveness of the province. However, when business investment in the province is weak, few jobs are created and workers are unable to gain the experience and training they need to stay relevant in a changing economy.

Industry in Ontario has a high perception of risk in the economy, reducing the incentive to invest in their own or other businesses. This perception, which encourages businesses to keep their assets liquid and flexible rather than re-invested in productive processes (such as new machinery and equipment, or people), has reduced new job growth to below what it could be.¹⁶

Weak Business Investment Climate



In 2017, firms plan to invest \$50.9 billion in Ontario, up from \$49.4 billion in 2016 but still below the \$52.1 billion invested in 2015 – and well below the pre-recession peak of \$53.8 billion.¹⁷

Skills & Talent Availability



Of the 62 per cent of Ontario businesses who attempted to recruit staff in the last six months of 2016, 82 per cent experienced at least one challenge in doing so – usually, finding someone with the proper qualifications.¹⁸ Of the new jobs created in the next decade, 40 per cent are expected to be in the skilled trades, but only 26 per cent of young people aged 13 to 24 are considering a career in these areas.¹⁹

Scaling-Up & Business Growth



Although the Ontario government currently offers 127 programs to support business growth, they are not necessarily oriented towards factors that influence growth.²⁰ Presently, 53 per cent of programs provide firms with resources to increase their general inputs (financial assistance and human/physical capital), such as the Strategic Jobs and the Ontario Venture Capital Fund, while fewer initiatives support international trade or other specific factors found to increase firm size and productivity.²¹

OUR PRIORITIES

To strengthen business competitiveness, the GNCC encourages the next government of Ontario to:

1.Modernize the apprenticeship system.

The current platforms utilized throughout the apprenticeship application and training processes are felt by many employers to be onerous, outdated and fragmented. There is an opportunity to enhance support for apprentices by leveraging the Ontario College Application Service to provide candidates with an electronic, single-entry access to the apprenticeship application and registration process. In addition, it is critical that the province revise the current journeyman-to-apprentice ratio.

Despite the recent decision to revise several ratios to start at 1:1, there needs to be greater flexibility within the Ontario apprenticeship framework, like other jurisdictions across Canada. In Nova Scotia, employers can apply for a ratio increase for the number of apprentices per journeyman on a per-project basis. The implementation of a similar process in Ontario could alleviate some of the challenges that employers experience with respect to recruiting sufficient journeymen to hire additional apprentices.

2.Ensure client-centric Employment Ontario services

Technology has facilitated unprecedented access to information through a variety of channels, creating greater efficiencies and matching clients to services like never before. Clients now expect interaction with providers to be convenient, flexible and personalized – and government services are not exempt from that expectation.

Employment Ontario services should be client-centric, to ensure it is straightforward for individuals to find jobs and employers to find employees. The pathway to transformation should involve building capacity at the staff level as well as collaborating with local partners, such as local chambers and boards of trade, to identify best practices in service delivery. The Government should also work to advance digital design and delivery to ensure that clients are offered the best possible service experience.

Furthermore, we recommend that government strengthen the existing outcomes-based funding model for employment services. The decision could generate significant efficiencies for government while improving the labour market outcomes of program participants.

3.Work with industry and post-secondary institutions to ensure that program offerings remain responsive to the changing labour market dynamics and the regional and sectoral needs of Ontario's business community.

Ontario is experiencing considerable labour shortages. To address this, we encourage more effective collaboration between government and industry and post-secondary associations, such as Colleges Ontario and the Council of Ontario Universities, to ensure that program offerings remain responsive to concerns of labour shortages in some of Ontario's crucial sectors. This should be accomplished through an updated assessment of human resources needs in the sector and improved data collection, analysis and sharing protocols.

4.Allocate resources to focus support on high growth firms and those with high growth potential, by delaying taxation on corporate income growth to overcome Ontario's scale-up challenge.

Currently, Ontario's tax system contains few incentives to encourage firm growth. In part, this issue warrants a longer-term discussion about the structure of the corporate income tax regime. However, in the short term we encourage the government to exempt firms' incremental income from corporate income tax in a given year. With this exemption, firms that are growing can reinvest their retained income into their business. Conditions to qualify for the exemption could be set to target higher-growth firms; for example, it could require a minimum rate of income growth over the previous year.

BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

CHALLENGES

Ontario is facing serious challenges impacting the well-being of its citizens and, consequently, the well-being of business:

Housing



The availability and affordability of housing greatly impacts the cost of living for Ontarians and limits the ability of Ontario business to attract and retain talent, reducing our competitiveness.

The Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis' (CANCEA) Shelter Consumption Affordability Ratio (SCAR) Index has risen more aggressively in Ontario than anywhere else across Canada since 2010. In Ontario and the GTHA, affordability has worsened by approximately 40 per cent since the early 1980s, and a further 15 per cent since 2000, resulting in both being the highest jurisdiction measures across the entire Index.²² This problem is marked in Niagara, with vacancy rates now dipping below 2 per cent and around 23,000 families spending more than 30 per cent of their income on shelter.²³

Infrastructure



Ontarians are experiencing the impact of a decades-long infrastructure funding gap; under-served by transportation, utility, and telecommunications stock that cannot meet the demands of today and has not been built to reflect the challenges of tomorrow, such as climate change.

Ontario's infrastructure funding gap is estimated, at a minimum, to be \$19 billion.²⁴ Costly damage to infrastructure because of extreme weather events has become common, and our aging stock is unable to handle the demands of a growing population.²⁵

OUR PRIORITIES

Building strong communities through adequate and affordable housing and good infrastructure also supports business prosperity and growth, which in turn supports those communities. The new government should aim at enabling strong, organic business growth. To ensure continued prosperity the GNCC encourages the next government to:

1. Construct a new hospital in Niagara Falls and keep the Welland hospital site open.

In March of 2018, the Government of Ontario announced a commitment to build a new hospital in Niagara Falls while keeping the Welland site open.²⁶ Increased budgets for hospital construction and renovation, however, have included no specific projects. In the interests of public health and in making Niagara a healthy community that will attract a strong workforce and strong local employers, the GNCC encourages the next Government of Ontario to budget for and construct a new hospital in Niagara Falls and to allocate sufficient funding to keep the Welland hospital open.

2. Fund more affordable housing and investigate new solutions to the affordable housing crisis.

Funding made available under the Promoting Affordable Housing Act (2016) is now becoming available, and a future government must continue to provide funding for affordable housing to municipalities. While the GNCC strongly encourages the next government to seek out, research, and test new approaches to solving Ontario and Niagara's affordable housing crises, provincial funding will be crucial to either current or future solutions. We therefore urge that increased funding to create more affordable housing be allocated.

3. Focus on strategic growth policies by ensuring that land use planning and development regulations are aligned to increase density and create more housing stock.

Ontario's housing affordability challenge is due to a series of linked issues: a lack of appropriate housing choices, a lack of housing productivity (e.g. over-housing, low density), and households being forced into worse options (e.g. moving to another community with consequently longer commute times impacting quality-of-life).²⁷ Development regulations and land use planning should be aligned to allow for more, and more diverse, housing to be built across Ontario. A strategic growth plan must consider housing affordability, which is not possible with a fixed housing stock.

4. Build adaptable and resilient infrastructure stock that can address future pressures including climate change and demographic shifts.

As Ontario embarks on a new era of infrastructure spending, the need to build and retrofit assets to be future-proof is paramount. This can be done by updating existing building codes and standards to reflect the impacts of climate change and population growth. The government should also support communities across the province in developing their own adaptation methods, such as retrofitting local stormwater infrastructure and shoring up stress breakwalls.

5. Expand mental healthcare in Ontario.

Mental health is a vital part of healthcare and building both healthy communities and healthy workplaces. The current Government of Ontario committed to a funding boost of \$2.1 billion for mental health and addiction services.²⁸ The GNCC urges the next government to uphold this commitment.

6. Review all social services and programs; treat social services as an interconnected system.

While progress in recognizing the value of various social programs and in funding has been made, social services are part of a system and under-funding or under-valuing services at one point in the system may lead to vastly increased costs elsewhere. Under-funding mental health may lead to much greater costs for other healthcare, addiction response, policing, or housing, for instance. The GNCC encourages a future government to treat social services holistically and adopt a broad approach, and to consider establishing an overall commission or liaising agency to coordinate between services which fall under different ministries.

IMPROVING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

CHALLENGES

Ontario's continued prosperity depends in large part upon the accountability, responsiveness, and responsibility of government. That prosperity must be aimed not just at the next budget cycle, or the next business cycle, but for the long-term. Ontario's fiscal choices should reflect long-term goals and fiscal sustainability.

A core pillar of the GNCC's advocacy is evidence-based decision-making and the use of data. The next Government of Ontario should commit to enacting data-driven policies and strengthen our institutional safeguards against untested decision-making.

Lack of
Measureable
Targets in
Strategic
Planning



Ontario's long-term planning for many growth industries lacks transparency and measurable targets. For example, Ontario's tourism industry has forgone \$16 billion in visitor spending since 2005, due to a lack of measurable targets for strategic growth.²⁹

Debt
Management



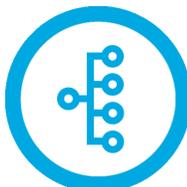
Ontario's debt will rise by 21 per cent in the next three years due to interest charges alone, with no existing plans to begin debt repayment.³⁰

Evidence-Based
Policy Making



In Ontario, 83 per cent of businesses believe that government should conduct cost-benefit analyses of all new policies, regulations or legislation before any changes take effect.³¹

Appropriate
Timelines
for Change



Due to the short timeline to implementation of Bill 148: Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act, Ontario business faces a \$12 billion economic problem that will put 185,000 jobs at risk.³²

OUR PRIORITIES

The GNCC recognizes the importance of government policy in building prosperity and a healthy business environment. Because of that importance, the government must ensure that its policies are data-driven, thoroughly tested and understood, and well-implemented with realistic timelines. With that in mind, the GNCC suggests that the next government of Ontario will be well-served to:

1.Create a meaningful plan to tackle the debt and move towards balanced or surplus budgets.

The latest Ontario budget has returned to deficit, and there is no short- or medium-term plan for surplus. Beyond balancing the budget, Ontario needs a clear path for long-term fiscal prudence. The GNCC recognizes that Ontario's debt cannot be paid down quickly without severe economic consequences but urges the next government to produce a sound plan for the long-term reduction of the province's public debt.

2.Ensure all proposed policy, regulation and legislation has been evaluated against sound, quantitative evidence.

The increased availability of data, and the capability to analyze that data through advanced analytics, has given policymakers an expanded ability to evaluate the costs and benefits of new initiatives, including assessing whether they will achieve their intended outcomes. Government decisions should be based on reliable and publicly available evidence, and analysis should have a clear acceptability threshold against which a change is evaluated.

3.Establish criteria for measuring progress toward the attainment of strategic goals and publicly publish these targets to ensure transparency.

The government's long-term planning cycles must include a framework for specific and measurable growth targets, as well as a timeline to achieve those goals (a practice adopted by many other jurisdictions). To do so, the government should clearly define the type of outcome it intends to achieve as well as methods for measuring and evaluating checkpoints and achievements. Measurement ensures that plans remain on track, reach targets on time, and ensure value for the investment of public funds.

4.Provide appropriate timelines to stakeholders when revising or implementing initiatives that will impact their operations.

The GNCC believes that greater stakeholder participation in government deliberations would benefit Ontario, and that although previous governments have taken pains to consult with a wide variety of stakeholders on policy initiatives, there is room to build upon this. In the interest of open government, we encourage broader and deeper stakeholder consultation, particularly with respect to timelines and roll-out processes of new policy, regulation and legislation. Government should work towards a closer, more permanent partnership with all stakeholders, including the private sector, academia, and civil society organizations.

5.Review transfers of responsibilities between the provincial and municipal governments to improve efficiency, service delivery, and cost.

The program of municipal "downloading" by which the Ontario government balanced its books from the mid-1990s resulted in massive costs imposed on municipalities for programs such as child care, transit, housing, and public health. By 2017, despite the reversal of some transfers by the current government, the funding gap totaled \$3.3 billion.³³

Municipal governments collect only 8 cents out of every Ontario tax dollar and are unable to fund these programs adequately while also tending to core municipal needs such as infrastructure investment and maintenance.³⁴ The GNCC urges the next Government of Ontario to review all transfers of responsibilities in terms of efficiency and service delivery rather than as a cost-saving opportunity for one level of government at the expense of another, to complete the uploading of previously-downloaded services, and to commit to consultations with municipal governments before embarking on provincial services reviews or cuts that would impact municipal government services.

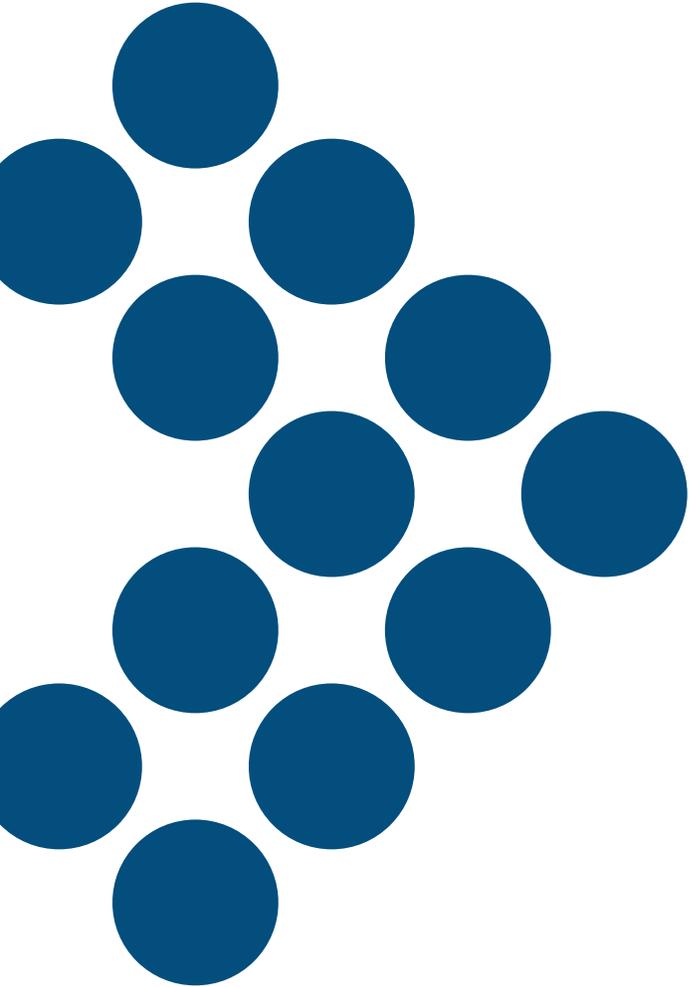
CONCLUSION

The GNCC hopes that the next government of Ontario will develop and adopt a comprehensive, data-driven and consultative prosperity strategy that aims at deepening and broadening Ontario's economic growth. We believe that the right policy approach can empower an economy that strengthens businesses of every size, that crosses industries and sectors to enable a broadly-growing economy without have-not businesses being left behind, and a base of economic growth which will not only help Ontario's businesses but which will produce natural and sustainable increases in wages and the standard of living.

The GNCC offers these suggestions to all candidates and parties seeking a mandate from the people of Ontario in 2018 for their consideration, and hopes that the next government will take them into account when developing its policies. As a strictly non-partisan organization, we are open to working with all candidates on their policies and platforms, and we are committed to being an enthusiastic and constructive partner for the next government of Ontario.

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