



For years, the Bishops of this Diocese, in consultation with the Social Justice & Advocacy Consultant and Committee, have made submissions to the provincial pre-budget consultation process and have responded to the provincial budget once it is released. As citizens, we have the right to make our voices heard in the development of these annual priorities shaping our public life. As Christians, we are particularly called to speak out for those with the least power (Prov. 31: 8-9), to lift up the concerns of the poor and vulnerable and to strive to safeguard God's creation. This year's response takes the form of an open statement expressing our deep disappointment that our recommendations continue to go unheeded.

Ontario's 2026 Budget continues with the same title as last year's: "A Plan to Protect Ontario."ⁱ Sadly, while it offers many tax cuts, incentives, and cost savings for Ontario businesses, it offers little protection to individual Ontarians facing rising costs and economic uncertainty, especially to those struggling to get by on low and moderate incomes. Nor does it offer much protection to Ontario's natural environment, at risk of pollution, habitat loss, wildfire, and other climate impacts.

Despite all provincial parties having agreed to Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy Act in 2009, and the conclusion of the last Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2025, no new provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy has been announced. Nor is there any mention of poverty or measures to address it in the 2026 budget, despite rising numbers of Ontarians living in poverty and year over year record food bank use. Under the heading "Enhancing Social Assistance to Meet Rising Costs" are a scant two paragraphs outlining the ongoing indexation of Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates and the exemption of the Canada Disability Benefit as income for ODSP recipients. This is the bare minimum, and does not address the fundamental inadequacy of ODSP rates. Further, there is still no change to Ontario Works rates, which have been frozen at \$733 per month for a single person since 2018, without indexation. During this time inflation has risen by more than 23%ⁱⁱ, with the cost of food and housing rising disproportionately higher than other goodsⁱⁱⁱ. Nor is there any mention of indexing earnings exemptions to inflation, without which social assistance recipients can work less every year before their income is clawed back, creating increased barriers to participation in the workforce. Thus, despite increased efforts to "connect social assistance recipients to employment," the percentage of social assistance recipients with earnings from employment has dropped to nearly half of what it was in 2019. Both ODSP and OW rates trap recipients well below the poverty line, with OW

recipients falling ever further behind. A recent Maytree report found that homelessness has increased by 72% among Ontario social assistance recipients since 2019^{iv}.

The 2026 Budget acknowledges increased demand for social assistance programs, projecting a \$1.1 billion increase in spending from its projections in the 2025 Fall Economic Statement. However, this is still far below what is needed even to maintain current levels of service. Ontario's Financial Accountability Office projects a funding shortfall of \$1.4 billion in 2026, growing to almost \$ 1.9 billion by 2027-28, even without raising the rates.

There is no new funding in this budget for skills training for workers impacted by tariffs or heightened economic uncertainty. The 6.4% increase in postsecondary funding over four years is undercut by the changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) which will shift the burden disproportionately to lower-income and mature students. Making up for years of postsecondary sector underfunding by saddling more students with debt after graduation does little to protect future generations in a changing economic climate.

As we noted in our 2026 pre-budget submission, homelessness has surged in Ontario since 2019, and rising poverty and food bank use suggest even greater homelessness is on the way. In January 2026, known homelessness in Ontario was projected to more than double from just under 85,000 in 2025 to over 177,000 in 2035, "under current conditions." In the event of a major economic downturn, such as might well be the impact of the ongoing US-Israel-Iran conflict, the number of homeless Ontarians could climb to 297,000 by 2035^v.

Yet this budget fails to address the scope of the housing and homelessness crisis. It projects housing starts at a mere 64,800 in 2026 – ten thousand fewer than in 2025 and nearly 60% lower than its stated goal of 150,000 new homes per year. Investments in affordable and supportive housing are limited to an initiative with High Art Capital to convert 2,200 condominiums into long-term rental units, including 550 affordable units; There is also mention of 900 new supportive housing units to be delivered through the HART Hub program, though it is unclear in what year these units will be made available, and no additional funding for the program has been announced. The budget also includes \$53 million over three years toward the operation of 450 supportive housing units. This is far below the scale of investment needed to address rising housing need in the province.

The chief housing measure of the 2026 budget is the removal of HST on new homes valued up to \$1 million for all homebuyers. This represents \$1.4 million for a benefit targeting higher-income Ontarians, rather than an investment in supporting those struggling to pay rent or who have already lost their homes. Without significant and sustained investments in affordable and supportive housing, coupled with rent controls that keep existing units

affordable and a commitment to tenants' rights, the housing crisis in Ontario will only continue to grow.

We are gravely concerned by the recent announcement terminating provincial funding for all remaining consumption and treatment sites in Ontario. Since the closure of sixteen such sites across the province in 2025, paramedic callouts and emergency room visits related to opioid overdoses have increased by 69.5% and 67% respectively, contributing to greater delays that affect all Ontarians^{vi}. Confirmed and probably opioid toxicity deaths in Ontario rose by 19.4% in the six months following the initial closure of consumption and treatment sites, reversing a 34.7% decline in the six months prior to their closure.^{vii} Drug use has been displaced outdoors, into public washrooms and alleys. Access to sterile equipment, which prevents the transmission of HIV, Hepatitis C and other blood-borne diseases, has been reduced. A year after they were to be operational, many HART Hubs are still waiting for withdrawal management, residential treatment and transitional beds, and supportive housing^{viii}. Even if the HART Hubs were fully operational, the concerns of overdose response, public drug use, and contaminated needles and equipment are not addressed within their abstinence model. We strongly believe that both supervised consumption sites and HART Hubs are part of a comprehensive, evidence-based, public health response to the opioid toxicity crisis, and both must be supported by adequate provincial funding.

The 2026 Budget likewise has little to say about protecting Ontario's environment or addressing the increasing impacts of climate change. In fact, climate change is mentioned only once in this budget, as a 2% allocation for climate change adaptation within the Green Bond program. Even more concerning, the budget calls on the federal government to ensure that its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions targets are not only "designed and implemented in a way that does not undermine the competitiveness of Ontario's auto sector" but are not "misaligned with industry realities or with policies in the United States" – a jurisdiction currently doing its utmost to reverse meaningful climate action.

A key aspect of climate change mitigation is the watershed and floodplain protections provided by Ontario's regional conservation agencies, which the province is seeking to amalgamate. Yet only \$3 million is allocated for the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, an amount which falls well short of the level required to maintain the protection currently provided by the most effective existing conservation authorities^{ix}. This signals that watershed and flooding protections in Ontario will be standardized to a lower level than is currently provided in much of the province, despite the growing risks.

The budget continues to commit the province to spending money on mega-highway projects such as Highway 413 and a feasibility study for a tunnel under the 401, despite the

immense costs, limited long-term benefits, and increased pollution and greenhouse gas emissions these projects will incur. In addition, the budget's emphasis on growing Ontario's AI infrastructure promises the creation of high paying jobs and the use of "clean energy" but does not mention any measures to address the jobs that will be lost to AI adoption nor the impact of AI data centres on municipal drinking water systems.

Throughout the 2026 budget, frequent references are made to the "streamlining" of federal and environmental assessment processes to "avoid duplication." Ontario has already prioritized development and weakened protections for species at risk through the passing of Bill 5, the "Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, 2025", and the many references to "streamlining" environmental assessments suggest that developers and industries will be held to the least restrictive standards. In particular, Budget 2026's allocation of \$2 million to support tourism planning at Wasaga Beach does not appear to include funding for protection of the endangered Piping Plover, which was removed when a large portion of the beach was stripped of Provincial Park status last year.

A further development, not explicitly mentioned in the budget, but in keeping with the emphasis on "streamlining" and "standardizing" environmental regulations, is introduced in legislation tabled immediately after the budget, the "Building Homes and Improving Transportation Infrastructure Act, 2026 (Bill 98). This legislation would strip municipal governments of their ability to require new buildings to conform to higher environmental standards, or to promote sustainable design. By requiring municipalities to prioritize construction speed and lower upfront costs above sustainability, the province leaves Ontarians vulnerable to higher energy bills, avoidable retrofits, and greater exposure to climate risks.

Despite its title, the 2026 Budget falls far short of protecting Ontario. Its streamlining of environmental standards leaves endangered species, watersheds, floodplains, and municipalities with lower levels of protection. It leaves Ontarians exposed to the physical and financial impacts of climate change. In closing the few remaining publicly funded supervised consumption sites, it undermines public health and puts greater strain on emergency services, affecting us all. Its failure to make substantial investments in affordable housing, coupled with rent controls, leave ever more Ontarians at risk of housing precarity and homelessness, while refusing to bring social assistance rates to an adequate level pushes the most vulnerable in our province into greater destitution. Far from "making life more affordable" for Ontarians, this budget's measures leave more Ontarians further behind, more vulnerable than ever to global economic, political, and climate risk.

As Anglicans, we are called by our commitment to Jesus Christ to speak up for the poor and marginalized in our communities, to seek to transform unjust structures in society, and to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation. We call on our provincial leaders to make choices and policies that protect those who are most vulnerable in our communities, so that together we can create a stronger and more resilient Ontario – one in which all are truly protected.

ⁱ <https://budget.ontario.ca/2026/pdf/2026-ontario-budget-en.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://inflationcalculator.ca/ontario/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2026/02/sparks-at-bank-article-2026-3/>

^{iv} <https://maytree.com/publications/designed-to-fail-how-ontarios-income-security-policies-create-and-perpetuate-homelessness/>

^v <https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2026/MunisUnderPressure1YearUpdateReport2026-01-13.pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.substanceusehealth.ca/sites/default/files/2026%20Evidence%20brief-closure%20of%20CTS%20in%20Ontario-2026-03-20.pdf>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} <https://www.canadianaffairs.news/2026/03/01/ontarios-hart-hubs-a-year-in-the-wins-and-failures/>

^{ix} <https://environmentaldefence.ca/2026/03/26/ontario-budget-2026/>