

MEDIA RELEASE

Fort William BIA and Waterfront District BIA Bring Northern Small Business Realities to the Province

The Fort William BIA and the Waterfront District BIA in Thunder Bay recently met with the Honourable MPP Nina Tangri, Associate Minister of Small Business, during a Northern, Rural, and Construction-focused roundtable at the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association (OBIAA) Conference held this year in St. Catharines, Ontario.

The meeting provided an opportunity to share the realities facing small businesses in Northern Ontario, including rising operating costs, ongoing supply chain pressures, reduced access to U.S. markets due to tariffs, and the challenges of operating in a smaller, more dispersed region compared to Southern Ontario.

Local examples highlighted significant increases in input costs, alongside the loss or reduction of U.S. online and wholesale revenue streams. Businesses in Northern Ontario are also managing a smaller customer base, higher transportation and input costs and fewer tools and supports than larger urban centres, where funding is often allocated based on population. These pressures are limiting their ability to remain competitive and pivot, despite a strong track record of resilience.

Concerns were also raised about recent changes to the Ontario Budget and LCBO ordering processes impacting restaurants and bars. The new system adds time-consuming steps and reduces opportunities to source and experiment with new inventory. With sales representatives rarely travelling to Northern Ontario and less ability to browse LCBO offerings, businesses face barriers to testing new products, potentially limiting creativity, innovation, and revenue in the hospitality sector.

Broader challenges, including housing constraints, workforce limitations, and social pressures affecting customer activity, were also identified as influencing the business environment.

While Thunder Bay continues to advance growth through the Smart Growth Action Plan, small businesses are navigating a gap between long-term economic development and present-day operating conditions.

The BIAs acknowledged recent provincial actions, including the expansion of the Rural Ontario Development (ROD) Program and the reduction in the small business corporate income tax rate, as positive steps demonstrating responsiveness to Northern communities.

“We appreciated the opportunity to speak directly to the realities Northern Ontario small businesses are facing,” said Kara Pratt from the Waterfront District BIA. “Any added barriers limit their ability to be creative, adapt, and respond quickly to changing conditions; these attributes are what small businesses are known for. We are assured that these concerns were heard and will be brought forward to the various Ministries impacting our small businesses and Northern Ontario at Queen’s Park for further consideration.”

The BIAs thank Minister Tangri and her team for their time, engagement, and willingness to listen to Northern perspectives as part of ongoing discussions shaping Ontario’s small business landscape.