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Feds need to have a clear plan, guest speaker says

Wednesday, January 28, 2015 by: Darren Taylor



The federal government has no clear agenda for Ontario, and Northern communities and voters in particular need to make their voices heard in this election year.

That was the message from Charles Cirtwill, Northern Policy Institute president and CEO, in an information-gathering session held with Sault stakeholders at a breakfast meeting held at the Days Inn by the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce, sponsored by the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corporation and the Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre.

Cirtwill, who is based in Thunder Bay, is currently meeting with stakeholders in Northern communities, listening to their concerns and compiling them for a report entitled A Federal Economic Agenda for Ontario.

"We'll make sure a copy (of the the report) goes out to all existing MPs when the election is called whether early or in October (as scheduled in accordance with the Canada Elections Act), we've made a commitment to deliver it to every candidate, every federal party office, and of course to other stakeholders such as chambers of commerce," Cirtwill said, speaking to SooToday.

"There isn't a strategy for Ontario...this comes back to political party platforms."

"More often than not you'll see party platforms that specifically have an Atlantic agenda, an agenda for the Pacific Northwest, for the West, for

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British Columbia, there have always been discussions for special status and special relationships with Quebec, but very seldom do you hear that conversation about Ontario," Cirtwill said.

"The perception (among political leaders) has always been 'Ontario is Canada'...the perception has been 'we have to make special deals for everybody else, but we've got a national platform that is largely oriented to Ontario.'"

Ontario, however, is being compromised, Cirtwill said, using the delivery of Employment Insurance benefits and equalization payments as examples.

"This is an exercise saying to decision makers 'Ontario is indeed unique,'" Cirtwill said.

Cirtwill said common concerns he has heard across the North involve infrastructure, workforce development, immigration, trade and investment, innovation, federal transfer funding for Ontario, and a need for targeted strategies for Ontario's various sectors and regions.

"Two big ones in Sault Ste. Marie are infrastructure, that's rail and road, and our ability to train people and get them into jobs."

"There's lots of training available...(but) people need to be educated about where the jobs are so that people can be employed," Cirtwill said.

"We also heard about information technology infrastructure...we live in an information age and we live in a region where some people are still on dial-up. That is a situation that has to be addressed, there's no question about that, and the federal government has a responsibility to do that."

"Our hope is the Tories, the Liberals, the NDP or the Greens, whoever it is, will listen...maybe there will be seven suggestions in the document, and maybe one of the parties will pick two or three of the suggestions in their party platforms," Cirtwill said.


"We want to make sure the information is made available to as many people as we can, so when the candidate comes knocking on your door for your vote you can say 'here are seven things I think are good for Ontario,' and if they give you the wrong answer, vote for somebody else."

The Federal Economic Agenda for Ontario is a combined effort between the Northern Policy Institute, a Northern Ontario independent think tank, the Mowat Centre, a University of Toronto-based think tank, and the Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, a not-for-profit organization funded by the provincial government.

The agenda was first produced at the 2014 Ontario Economic Summit last fall.

Consultations with stakeholders across Ontario are currently ongoing, with the final copy of the agenda scheduled for completion in the spring.

(PHOTO: John Febbraro, Sault Ste. Marie EDC, Shelley Barich and Monica Dale, Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce, and Charles Cirtwill, Northern Policy Institute president and CEO at a Leader's Breakfast on Federal Economic Agenda for Ontario, Days Inn, January 28, 2015. Darren Taylor/SooToday)



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