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Liberal platform includes rural cash

Grits to release full plan next week

Posted By **James Wallace** — Osprey News

Premier Dalton McGuinty will release his official campaign platform next week and it will include a \$40-million rural economic development fund, Osprey News has learned.

The government's Rural Economic Development or "RED" program has already earmarked \$45.1 million for 139 projects in rural Ontario since the Liberals were elected in 2003 and the party campaign platform launch next week will extend the program for another four years.

"By increasing funding for our economic development fund we'll be giving more families job opportunities in rural Ontario," a Liberal source told Osprey News.

Ontario voters go to polls on Oct. 11 and the province's political parties are gearing up for what promises to be a close race between the Liberals and Conservatives over who forms the next government.

As reported in an SES Research/Osprey Media poll this week, McGuinty's Liberals are headed toward losing their majority government, baring a shift in campaign fortunes, but are poised to hang on to a minority with 40 per cent of the decided vote.

The Conservatives under leader John Tory remain within striking distance of the Liberals with 34 per cent support but will need momentum to gain power. The NDP have crept up to 19 per cent, a support level that could make leader Howard Hampton a kingmaker over either a Liberal or Conservative minority. Support for Frank de Jong's Green Party has grown to eight per cent.

Because the campaign is close, rural and regional Ontario will play a key role in the outcome and provincial politicians may work harder than they have in the recent past to woo voters outside the big cities.

Tory, for example, has already unveiled a northern economic development strategy that promises among other things to move 10 per cent of the Ontario government's Toronto office space to northern Ontario if he becomes premier.

The Liberal Rural Economic Development Program being announced next week is intended to help rural communities expand local businesses, attract tourism, improve skills development and access to health care and remove barriers to economic growth.

Recent grants have ranged from \$950,000 for skills training to a Chatham Kent manufacturer who makes environmentally friendly utility and transmission poles to a \$137,000 contribution to Cornwall's Heart of the City revitalization project, \$11,150 on a survey to help the Town of Cobourg promote community revitalization, economic growth and local tourism, and \$2.4 million to Kellogg Canada Inc., which is building a new 200,000-square-foot cereal manufacturing plant in Belleville.

The Liberals will also promise in their platform to take steps to deal with the growing problem of long waiting lists for patients in hospital emergency rooms.

As previously reported by Canadian Press, Liberal sources say the emergency room strategy would build on the government's existing wait-times strategy, which so far has targeted five key areas: diagnostic scans, cancer, cardiac operations, cataract surgeries, and hip and knee replacements.

Contact the writer at jwallace@ospreymedia.ca.

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