

Return to Red Zone eyed as Region awaits re-opening plan

As York Region awaits word over the next few days on what restrictions will be in place when COVID-19 hotspots are lifted out of lockdown, leaders have signalled they would like a return to a modified Red (Control) Zone.

This was the message delivered to Regional Council last week by Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, as lawmakers endorsed a motion advocating a return to Red.

‘Yesterday, I had discussions with Dr. David Williams (Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health) on the issue of lockdowns,’ said Dr. Kurji on Thursday morning. ‘The process that [would be followed] would be a very similar process to the one they had in place previously. Next Tuesday or Wednesday (February 16 or 17) I would expect a call from the Chief Medical Officer of Health, some discussions on our local epidemiology, and then he would be making his recommendations to the Minister the next day.’

‘Based on our current incidence?’ Dr. Williams was going to recommend that we move into the Red Zone on February 22. Now, the new Red Zone is very much like the Red+ Zone (put in place after York Region was last in the Red Zone) because the Province has actually tightened up some of the restrictions on the capacities of retail outlets. However, we will be watching the variants of concern very carefully and the variants of concern so far Provincially seem to be over 5 per cent.’

Upcoming discussions, he said, might entail additional surveillance, monitoring and testing.

With increased vaccinations, Dr. Kurji noted there are ‘signs of improvement’ as far as outbreaks in long-term care settings are concerned, but measures will be in place to hit the breaks should lifting the lockdown result in a rise of new cases.

‘With the policy of enhanced inspections, and with the messaging to the public that they still have to stay at home and only go out for essential visits, and with the possibility of introducing the Emergency Brake mechanism if we discover that the variants are causing quite an explosive growth, with all that opening on the 22nd into the Red Zone seems feasible as it gives our businesses some sort of breathing space and it assists with social isolation and mental health issues that we have always been concerned about,’ said Dr. Kurji.

‘I think it is prudent we wait (until February 22 for a lockdown to be lifted) because that particular timeframe allows us, perhaps, to reduce our incidence levels even further. As incidence levels reduce further, it reduces the overall risk both in terms of variants and in terms of getting outbreaks in other places. There is a small possibility that if our incidence rates keep on going down that we could potentially enter into an Orange Zone, although I wouldn't hold out for that at this point.’

Regional Council approved advocating for a return to the Red Zone by an overwhelming margin, with Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas voting in favour of it as well.

The day following the Region's meeting, the province announced 27 public health units would be returning to the Province's re-opening framework. Niagara Region Public Health will remain in the Grey-Lockdown Zone, while some communities surrounding York Region – including the Simcoe-Muskoka District Health Unit and Durham Region Public Health – would once again be in the Red Zone.

The City of Toronto and Region of Peel, like York, await word.

‘Recognizing the risk posed by new variants to the Province's pandemic response, Ontario is introducing an ‘emergency brake’ to allow the Chief Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the local Medical Officer of Health, to immediately advise moving a region into a Grey-Lockdown to interrupt transmission. Local Medical Officers of Health also have the ability to issue Section 22 orders under the Health Protection and Promotion Act, to target specific transmission risks in the community,’ said the Province in a statement on Friday.

Health Minister Christine Elliott noted that it is important that people still follow public health measures as vaccines are rolled out.

"The health and safety of Ontarians remains our number one priority," she said. "While we are cautiously and gradually transitioning some regions out of shutdown, with the risk of new variants this is not a reopening or a return to normal. Until vaccines are widely available, it remains critical that all individuals and families continue to adhere to public health measures and stay home as much as possible to protect themselves, their loved ones and their communities."

Added Dr. Williams: "While the trends in Public Health indicators are heading in the right direction, we still have work to do. Everyone is strongly advised to continue staying home, avoid social gatherings, only travel between regions for essential purposes, and limit close contacts to your household or those you live with."

As of Tuesday, February 16, Aurora has seen a total of 905 cases of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, 842 of which are now marked as recovered. There have been 40 confirmed deaths. Of the 23 active cases, 19 are attributed to local transmission and close contact, 3 to institutional outbreak, and 1 to workplace cluster.

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