

## Vaccine and mask mandates continue to lift across York Region, country

New rules on vaccine and mask mandates continue to come down at both the national and local level.

On Tuesday, the Federal government announced an end to vaccine mandates for domestic travel on planes and trains, as well as an end to vaccine mandates for outbound travel, effective June 20.

The changing landscape on the national front comes just days after mask mandates on public transit, one of the last remaining mandates in Ontario, were lifted on Saturday, June 11.

In his now bi-weekly update on the local COVID situation, Dr. Barry Pakes, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, said that these mandates were lifted with few exceptions including local Mobility on Demand services.

The remaining [mask] requirements in healthcare settings and on transit at the Provincial level have now been removed; however, all 17 GTA hospitals, including those in York Region, and almost all healthcare settings, are still requiring masking by patients, visitors and staff, he said. It is now on a facility-by-facility basis. There is no doubt that in any healthcare settings where there may be vulnerable, older or immunocompromised people present, it is still most certainly best and may be required by the facility to wear a mask.

Regarding transit, while York Region Transit, the TTC, among others, will no longer require masking on vehicles and property, for your safety and peace of mind, as well as the safety and peace of mind of others in the community, I would still strongly recommend you wear a mask in all transit settings.

Maintaining mask mandates for Mobility on Demand services, he added, was a wise and prudent policy given the potential vulnerability of paratransit users, as well as out of concern for their comfort and wellbeing.

Ministry of Long-Term Care guidance, he added, still requires masking in retirement and long-term care settings a prudent and necessary measure.

In general, please be kind to anyone who is not comfortable with the current situation knowing that COVID-19 is still very transmissible and present within the community, Dr. Pakes said, adding that wastewater signals are not yet showing a rapid decrease in the virus locally.

That being said, hospital admissions across York Region are about half of what they were a month ago a great development, he said but these numbers are still too persistently high and stable at more than 500 admitted patients.

Unfortunately, the acute care system is far from pre-pandemic care levels with a significant backlog of cases and ongoing healthcare worker capacity challenges, said Dr. Pakes. We're looking forward to a summer that will likely look very similar to pre-COVID times for most of us, but in the Public Health and Healthcare world, and for many residents who need those services, things will still not be normal.

We know a seventh COVID wave is very likely in the fall and winter, both because of waning immunity and waning vaccine protection. Our goal over the summer is to get cases as low as possible so that they are starting from a much lower level as we go into the fall.

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter