

Health and business interests go head-to-head amid third wave lockdown

A third wave of COVID-19 has brought a third lockdown after the Provincial Government hit the 'emergency brake' sending all of Ontario's Public Health Units into a modified 'shutdown' that will be in place for four weeks.

The Province announced the Ontario-wide move on Thursday, April 1, with the decision coming into effect for at least one month beginning just after midnight this past Saturday.

But, while Premier Doug Ford and Deputy Premier Christine Elliott, MPP for Newmarket Aurora have stated that action is needed to address the latest wave of the virus, others, including Mayor Tom Mrakas have said the move will do nothing but hurt local small business.

'We are facing a serious situation and drastic measures are required to contain the rapid spread of the virus, especially the new variants of concern,' said Premier Ford last week. 'I know pulling the emergency brake will be difficult on many people across the province, but we must try and prevent more people from getting infected and overwhelming our hospitals. Our vaccine rollout is steadily increasing, and I encourage everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated. That is our best protection against this deadly virus.'

Added Minister Elliott: 'Ontario, like many other provinces and jurisdictions around the world, is in the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and immediate action is required to help turn the tide. Implementing a provincewide emergency brake was not an easy decision to make and is not one we take lightly. As we continue to vaccinate more Ontarians, the end is in sight, but right now these necessary measures will help to stop the spread of variants in our communities, protect capacity in our health care system, and save lives.'

Under the rules now in effect, indoor organized public events and social gatherings are prohibited, while outdoor gatherings will be limited to five people, except for gatherings with members of the same household (or your own household plus one other person who lives alone). In-person shopping is limited in all retail settings with 50 per cent capacity for supermarkets and grocery stores and all other stores selling essentials, while all other retail settings, including big box stores, are limited to 25 per cent capacity. Personal care services will be prohibited during the order.

These limitations, however, have drawn the ire of Mayor Mrakas, who issued a statement of his own just hours after the new measures were announced.

'We need to put the proper protocols in place to manage the spread of the virus,' he said. 'I also understand there is an urgency with respect to hospitalizations and ICU capacity. However, what I am struggling with is how this most recent set of restrictions will address this. There are several regions which have been under these same restrictions for the last few months, yet the case counts and hospitalizations in those areas are growing. If we want to address the issue of ICU and hospital capacity, we need to target the right places. While I respect the decisions of the Premier and Cabinet, these are tough decisions for the Province as a whole, I am truly disappointed this decision will do nothing but hurt our small local business.'

'This is being called a 'shutdown', yet retail is open, malls are open, industrial and manufacturing are open, you can go and play a round of golf with three others? what exactly is being shut down? This is not a shutdown; it is a closure of a select group of businesses who are largely not responsible for the spread. How many cases have been in a manufacturing/industrial setting? How many in local grocery stores? Many more examples and yet they have not been shut down.'

The Mayor said focus should instead be on 'enforcing protocols and restrictions' that are supported by data.

'We all want to keep everyone safe as we continue to vaccinate,' he concluded, 'but we need to revisit our approach to this and not just close certain select businesses. This approach, in my opinion, is not going to help and only hurt our small businesses who are hanging on by a thread.'

In a joint statement, however, Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health and the CEOs of York Region's hospitals ? Arden Krystal of Southlake, Jo-anne Marr of Markham Stouffville and Altaf Stationwala of Mackenzie Health ? said the fight against COVID-19 was at ?a critical crossroads.?

?While efforts to vaccinate residents have been successful thus far, positive cases of COVID-19 are growing, and we remain in a race against variants of concern,? they said on Thursday afternoon. ?Today's announcement of another province-wide shutdown reinforces the need for each of us to do our part to slow the spread of this virus in our region, our hospitals, our communities and in our individual homes. As we celebrate both Passover and Easter and look ahead to the April school break, it's vitally important all residents across our nine cities and towns continue to follow public health measures, including staying home as much as possible, avoiding social gatherings with those outside of your immediate household and wearing a mask when physical distancing cannot be maintained. The safest way to observe the holidays with anyone outside of your immediate household is to do so virtually.

?COVID-19 variants, which spread more easily and have the potential to cause a more severe outcome, are circulating in our communities and intensive care admissions are the highest they have been since the pandemic began. This puts even more pressure on our health care system, which is already stretched to the limit. Hospitals are preparing to start reducing surgical procedures again to preserve hospital capacity to avoid tragic situations that we have seen in other jurisdictions where demand for ICU care has surpassed the number of beds available.

?Our collective actions, including throughout the holiday weekend and throughout the 28-day province-wide shutdown, will determine what happens in the weeks and months ahead and how quickly we can all return to the activities we all enjoy and miss.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter