

Local business owners share Stage 2 reopening concerns, questions with Finance Minister

As the Province keeps a close eye on numbers before moving parts of Ontario to Stage 3 of its re-opening plan, the Government wants to keep momentum on its side.

This was the message delivered to Aurora Chamber of Commerce members last week by Finance Minister Rod Phillips at a virtual roundtable for local business owners and officials hosted by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa.

The roundtable was a way for the Province to check in with local businesses as they settled into Stage 2 and all the new realities the re-opening plan has presented so far.

"We have been trying very hard to take opportunities to check in through this pandemic," said Minister Phillips. "In the middle of March, I was just getting ready to present our annual budget. It was a typical five-year budget, the kinds of plans we normally make.

"In March, I set out a one-year plan because we really didn't have the opportunity then to have the kind of perspective we need. In November of this year, we'll lay out a multi-year plan that will include a lot of the things we want to do around recovery."

Last week's session was an opportunity for the local business community to sound off on what they would like to see addressed this fall as well as right here and now.

Among the chief concerns brought to the table were making sure measures were well in hand should a second wave of COVID-19 hit Ontario.

According to Sandra Ferri, President & CEO of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, members have expressed "concern about moving forward", how a second wave might be handled, and whether alternatives to Stages 1, 2, and 3 are being explored.

"We are looking very closely at what we learned through the first wave and those of us in government have to be kind of humble about what we can and can't do and know what's possible," he said. "The objective of the staged process we have been going through has been to not have to retreat and take steps backward in order to manage the process.

"There are two things that happen everywhere when the economy has been reopened. There are flare-ups and things like what happened in Kingston [with the virus outbreak at a nail salon] and we have to be able to handle those flare-ups [so] we don't go backwards in time.

The second thing we know that is happening everywhere in the world is fewer people come back initially, whether that is businesses that could open and choose not to, or employees that come back to the businesses because there are things like the CERB and other factors, but also just people being concerned about coming back to work and fewer customers come back initially. Our hope is that when we have a second wave, and I don't say that because I know there will be one, but I think it is prudent that we plan for it, we would be able to on a case by case basis respond to those impacts.

Some of the re-opening impacts, however, are smaller-scale and business-specific.

To that end, the Chamber fielded a question about whether or not Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) required to keep employees safe can be considered part of a business' regular operating expenses or treated altogether differently.

The treatment of PPE, said Minister Phillips, is something that is being looked at for the November budget.

In terms of direct subsidy for it, right now we're really focused on making sure that the health system, which in this case includes the broader health system of long-term care, [has] access to PPE, he said. We have made some great steps with that. One of the things we're looking at is whether there is the opportunity for the Province to become an aggregated buyer of PPE to reduce some of the costs, even if it is going to be a cost that has to be born by business. Because of the volumes we're having to buy for the public health system, the prison system and all of those areas, whether or not there is an ability to drive some real discounts so the private sector can take advantage of that, those are areas we're looking at right now.

Top of mind, however, is building up consumer confidence once again.

This was a theme Newmarket-Aurora MPP Christine Elliott, who holds the dual portfolios of Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, told The Auroran last month, and this was reiterated last week by Minister Phillips.

One of the realities of every place that has reopened is fewer people come back initially and, over time, in the places that have been successful, people see the combination of health statistics, maybe they drive by a patio a couple of times?it is about people's confidence.

Added Mr. Parsa: You can see that when businesses open slowly, they are seeing their clients are returning?and more and more people will follow suit. We have to get out there and support these local businesses. These local businesses truly make our local communities. They are the ones who support our local sports teams, they are the ones who support our local Legions and Chambers and fundraisers that we have. They are truly what makes our communities and we have to support them.

By Brock Weir