

Masks, face coverings mandatory this Friday

Face masks and coverings will be mandatory in all indoor public spaces across York Region this Friday, July 17.

The decision was made unanimously by Regional Council following a day-long session last Thursday.

New rules will take effect at 12.01 a.m. on July 17 and, barring any further changes from Regional Council, will remain in place until November 30.

Effective Friday, business owners and operators in York Region must have a policy in place to prohibit people from entering if they are not wearing a face mask or covering, said the Region following last week's meeting. Customers, employees and visitors who enter enclosed public spaces must wear a mask or face covering.

Premises covered under the new regulations include stores, malls, places of worship, community centres, recreation facilities, libraries and art galleries, community agencies serving the public, common areas of hotels and other lodgings, places of entertainment, and open houses and presentation centres used in real estate.

Individual exemptions include children under the age of five and individuals who are unable to wear face coverings due to medical reasons.

I supported the recommendation based on the advice of our Medical Officer of Health, who stated that widespread use of face coverings can have a positive effect on the course of the epidemic," said Mayor Tom Mrakas, Aurora's representative at the Regional table, following last week's meeting. As we move to Stage 3 of re-opening, we want to minimize a second wave to allow our economy to continue to recover from the shutdowns. Our recent increase in daily cases should remind us all that this pandemic is not over.

We are in this together and it will take all of us working collectively to get through this, and that is exactly what we must do as a community, province and country.

Prior to the Regional Council meeting, Mayor Mrakas took the opportunity at Aurora's General Committee meeting on July 7 to gauge the support of local lawmakers on the issue of mandatory masks.

Councillor Rachel Gilliland admitted it was a touchy subject with valid points on either side, but voiced her general support for the new measures.

?For the sake and safety of the Town and the residents in the community, I think it is a very small sacrifice for the residents of our Town to wear a mask as we get through COVID-19,? she said. ?We want to support our businesses and our economy going forward and if that is a small sacrifice I have to make to go into a store and wear a mask to ensure we continue on with our economy, I am in support of doing that.?

Exceptions, she said, should be made for people who have medical conditions and breathing problems, issues she noted have already been voiced to her by constituents. She also said she would like to see education rather than enforcement as the order of the day.

Councillor Sandra Humfries echoed these views, stating wearing a mask where social distancing is not possible ?is so critical right now.?

?I believe [mask rules] will help our economy open up a little safer and give us that security [of trying to keep] each other safe, to be indoors, and to do things we haven't been able to do so freely,? she said, acknowledging exemptions should be made for people who truly can't wear a face covering. ?I do believe right now that this is the way to go in order to get this economy going [and] for us to get back out there and do what we so freely did before.?

For Councillors Michael Thompson and Harold Kim, it was important that the measures instituted by the Region of York were in line with those of surrounding areas such as the Regions of Durham and Peel, as well as the City of Toronto.

?I am all for the encouragement and education of residents to try and get them to voluntarily utilize masks so that the public is best healthy and safe,? said Councillor Thompson.

Added Councillor Kim: ?In this COVID environment, you think we would all be acting as one humanitarian body, but as everyone has cabin fever, it has become somewhat adversarial and unfortunate. My view is whatever York Region decides has to be consistent in the Regions that are adjacent to ours.?

Councillor John Gallo, however, said he was ?somewhat on the fence? regarding mandatory face coverings.

?I believe that if our medical experts say this is the right thing to do, then I encourage it,? he said. ?At the same time, those who don't feel comfortable wearing it, I certainly won't look at them in any different way. I am a strong proponent of individual rights and, at the same time, I think we encourage people to wear masks, but?if someone doesn't feel they want to or need to, I don't have an issue with them not wearing it.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she believed ?individual

rights? are important but agreed with her colleagues that making masks mandatory was a ?small sacrifice to make for public health and safety.?

?I think, of course, individual rights are important, but I think this, if you will excuse my expression, absolutely trumps individual rights as it is for our community health,? she said. ?I hope it will be as fulsome a motion as possible so that we can be very clear about what is expected. Education is important, but I think at this point in time people have been pretty much educated and it is whether they want to or don't want to, or will or won't.

?I think that is what is going to be self-policing in a way, and I have seen a case of this where people actually took over and were very vocal when other people didn't comply. It was in a different situation, but I think as it is our health and our lives at stake maybe there will be some public policing on this.?

By Brock Weir