

Stay-at-home measures "levels playing field" for some businesses

A third wave has brought a third stay-at-home order from the Province, but this one, according to some, helps "level the playing field" for small businesses competing against big box stores.

Premier Doug Ford and Health Minister Christine Elliott announced the four-week stay-at-home order, effective just after midnight on April 8, on Wednesday afternoon.

Under the new restrictions, which go hand-in-hand with the measures announced last week as part of the Province-wide "emergency brake," all businesses must ensure that any employee who can work from home does so rather than coming into the workplace; individuals are urged to restrict travel outside their home region and only leave their homes for essential purposes such as going to get groceries or pharmacy items; and to attend medical appointments.

Additionally, new rules address retail with grocery stores and pharmacies allowed to continue in-person shopping with restrictions and capacity limits, while big box retailers will be restricted to selling essential items such as groceries, pharmaceutical items, healthcare and personal care items, and pet care supplies.

Further restrictions are applied to non-essential retail limited to delivery and curbside, while malls will be restricted as well.

"As we ramp up our vaccine distribution, we also need to make sure we take the steps necessary to slow the spread of the virus and protect our ICU and hospital capacity," said Premier Ford, noting that mobile vaccinations will soon come online for eligible residents 18+ in high-risk neighbourhoods while all education workers in the high-risk areas of Toronto and Peel will be brought forward in the vaccine rollout.

"The reality is despite everything we have done so far, the COVID-19 situation in Ontario is getting worse as these new variants continue to spread," the Premier continued. "Our hospitals are reaching capacity and patients in the GTA must now be sent to other parts of the Province for care. Right now, above all else, our plan is to get needles into arms and protect our hospitals. That is why" on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, I am declaring a state of emergency with a Province-wide stay-at-home order.

"To boil it down as simple as possible, unless it is for an essential reason, please stay home because the situation is extremely serious and we just need to hunker down right now. We need to limit mobility. Non-essential retail stores will go back to curbside pickup with delivery allowed from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Big box and discount stores will be allowed to sell essential items only such as food, medicine, cleaning supplies, and personal care items. During the stay-at-home orders, residential evictions will once again be suspended because no one should live in fear of losing their homes.

"I know this is tough on business, but I promise we will continue to have your backs."

These new restrictions on businesses, particularly the restriction of big box store sales, were welcomed to some extent by Mayor Tom Mraz who said that while it was "disappointing" that stay-at-home orders were necessary due to rising case counts, the details provided a step in the right direction.

"While I am disappointed we need to move in this direction, I appreciate that the Premier's approach is closer to an actual lockdown," said Mayor Mraz in a statement. "I have maintained that if you are to 'lock down' it should be across the board and not penalize a select few businesses. This stay-at-home order will be different as it limits big box stores to just groceries and pharmacies, something that I, along with the other mayors, have been asking for: a level playing field that truly limits any openings to the core essentials."

But the frustration felt by local businesses who have had to continually be at the ready to adapt to new regulations and restrictions as

they evolve was voiced by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, which said despite all this, the local business community has demonstrated nothing short of resilience.

“After the implementation of another shutdown this week, we have heard from many businesses about their frustration with the constantly changing operating rules for businesses and the fear of the long-term effects that these devastating restrictions will have on their businesses,” said Sandra Ferri, President & CEO of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. “We know that the accelerated vaccine rollout and the prioritization of hot zones and essential workers is critical. We also know that this will take time. We applaud the resilience of our many businesses who have taken extraordinary measures to adjust and pivot for survival.”

Mayor Mrakas also emphasized the increasing vaccine rollout, adding: “I recognize the next several weeks will be difficult. However, for the continued safety of our residents and to take the pressure off the hospitals, we must effectively use this time as communities and as a province to ramp up our vaccinations. We are ready at the municipal level with infrastructure to get the vaccines into as many willing arms as possible. We have clinics, mobile sites and pharmacies ready to go and administering the vaccine with capacity for much more. But we need our Federal Government to get us the much-needed supply. During this stay-at-home order, let's get all of our most vulnerable and essential workers vaccinated so that when we get out of this stay-at-home order, it will be the last time we ever have to shut anything down.”

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter