

End of lockdown eyed for February 22 as Aurora sees 40th COVID-related death

Regional Council, in a vote of 14-7, rejected a motion on Thursday calling on York to send a clear message to the Province that it is time to once again re-open Ontario.

The decision came just days before the Province announced stay-at-home orders in York Region, Toronto, and Peel would be extended until at least February 22 and Aurora saw its 40th fatality attributed to COVID-19.

Council threw out the motion following a caution from Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, that the 'stakes are too high' to re-open right now until there is better data on the COVID-19 variants that have come out of the United Kingdom and South Africa.

'I had wanted to recommend moving to the Red Zone and even entertained the idea of increased capacities in restaurants, depending on the individual square footages,' said Dr. Kurji. 'I had wanted to recommend we institute [an order] which would implement the physical distancing and capacity requirements in big box stores and retail establishments that existed in the Grey Lockdown. This would be contingent on whatever the Province was deciding on. If it happened to relax those particular requirements, I would have wanted us to have [that] in place. However, finding the variants has dictated more caution now.'

In the course of a week in York Region, the number of cases related to the variants had more than doubled from 15 to 39 and Dr. Kurji said more cases are expected now that Ontario Public Health only began screening for the specific variants last Wednesday.

'What is not clear to me at this point [is] whether we have managed to control that situation well through multiple methods,' Dr. Kurji continued.

Public Health, he said, is 'aggressively' following up on close contacts of these cases to make sure they are properly self-isolating and they have 'lowered the bar' on who might be considered a close contact in these variant situations. More time, he added, is needed to judge the efficacy of new restrictions implemented by the Federal and Provincial Government on screening foreign travel to reduce the spread.

'The stay-at-home order has probably had a great effect in terms of reducing the transmission of COVID-19 cases in our communities and I would hope that, with that, it ought to have reduced the transmission of the variants as well,' said Dr. Kurji. 'Will we have reached the point where we have almost burnt out the variant through all of these measures? I would be very skeptical if we have actually done that. I would think we would still have the variant circulating in small numbers in the community. However, the reason for cautiousness is the stakes are very high.'

Based on projections, Dr. Kurji said there is a chance the variants could result in higher case numbers than what we saw earlier this year.

'When we consider the behaviour of the variant in other countries, it is obvious that in many countries it has become the dominant strain. When it becomes the dominant strain, we may be looking at proportions that are well above 30 per cent. We may be looking at proportions of probably 60 per cent. We would be looking at a situation where there would be, no question about it, into a third wave and into a time when our vaccines haven't rolled out. This would be a rather catastrophic situation for us all, not mentioning the fact that our hospitals are already struggling.'

'There is no question in my mind that the only way the Province is managing to cope is by distributing the hospitalizations across hospitals in the Province and [Ontario Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Dave] Williams had previously taken the position that he wanted to see case counts of under 1,000 a day as that modelling would reflect the ability of our ICUs to cope.'

Throughout Thursday's meeting, which lasted more than three hours, Council members and the public alike expressed passionate

views on both sides.

Several business owners submitted written delegations to the Region supporting the motion, while others appeared before their representatives via video link. Many business owners spoke not only about the financial impacts of the shutdown and stay-at-home orders, but also the mental health impacts of not being able to continue business-as-usual.

Some also cited what they indicated was a double standard in allowing York Region students to return to class on February 16 while they can't open their doors to a few customers at the time.

Among the seven Regional Councillors who supported the motion to send a message to Queen's Park that it was time to re-open was Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas, who said it wouldn't hurt to clarify the Region of York's position as the Provincial Government weighs its options.

"I think there are two things every single one of us can agree on," said Mayor Mrakas. "The safety of our residents in York Region is the most important thing. The second is we are all concerned about the small local businesses in our communities and we want to see them up and running. We have defended that time and time again and I think every single one of us can agree on that.

"As for this motion, I will support it because from Day One I have always believed that there has to be a balance. We need to be able to open up our economy while maintaining safety for our residents. We can't keep doing this merry-go-round. We can't keep opening, closing, opening, closing. We're going to live with this virus. I fully appreciate Dr. Kurji for all his recommendations and pushing hard for the reopening of our economy, but at the same time I think we do need to let the Provincial Government know where we stand and how we're advocating for residents."

That being said, Mayor Mrakas noted that he understands the position of waiting to see where numbers stand for a week or two, but given that it wasn't likely the Province would make a decision on re-opening before students in York, Peel and Toronto went back to school after the Family Day long weekend, it wouldn't be out of line to say, "We would like to see our local economy reopen and be back in that Red Zone" so they know where York is coming from.

Regional Council is expected to revisit the issue seven to twelve days from February 4 to see where numbers stand.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter