

Getting back into Red leaves some questions: Chamber

On Friday, the Provincial Government followed recommendations from Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Chief Medical Officer of Health, bringing York Region out of lockdown and back into the Red (Control) Zone of Ontario's COVID-19 framework.

Effective this past Monday, February 22, York Region entered the Red Zone leaving fellow COVID-19 hotspots such as the City of Toronto, Region of Peel, and North Bay-Parry Sound in the Grey (Lockdown) Zone until at least March 8. Keeping the remaining three jurisdictions in lockdown followed recommendations from their respective Medical Officers of Health.

Based on a general improvement in trends of key indicators, York Region Public Health will be moving back to the Framework at the Red-Control level and will no longer be subject to the Stay-at-Home order, said the Province in a statement. After returning to the Framework, public health regions are required to stay in their level for at least two weeks. The government will then assess the impact of public health and workplace safety measures to determine if the region should stay where it is or be moved to a different level. Public health regions may be moved to a higher level within the two-week window, if necessary, based on the set indicators and thresholds outlined in the Framework. In addition, Ontario has introduced an 'emergency brake' to allow the Chief Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the local medical officer of health, to immediately advise moving a region into Grey-Lockdown to interrupt transmission.

In a statement, Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. David Williams said while health indicators in places like York Region have improved enough to loosen some restrictions, residents and businesses must remain vigilant.

Everyone is strongly advised to continue staying at home, avoid social gatherings, only travel between regions for essential purposes, and limit close contacts to your household or those you live with, regardless of which level of the framework you're in, he said.

Revised Red (Control) restrictions will allow bars, restaurants and other eating establishments to allow 10 patrons for indoor dining with a limit of four people sitting together.

Essential retail such as grocery stores and pharmacies will be able to welcome customers to 75 per cent capacity, with other retailers like liquor stores, hardware stores, garden centres and big box stores limited to 50 per cent capacity. Personal care services requiring the removal of masks is prohibited.

Organized public events and social gatherings will now be allowed to resume with limits of five people indoors and 25 people outdoors. Religious ceremonies, including weddings and funerals, will be allowed to operate at 30 per cent capacity indoors and a maximum of 100 people indoors. Event spaces are now allowed to open with 10 people per facility indoors and 25 outdoors, with no more than four people sitting together.

But this complex list of restrictions, however, has raised concerns from business advocates such as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. Although they say getting back into the Red Zone will be a relief to many small businesses, some inequities still need to be addressed.

From my perspective, as a community, I think we know we're going to be living with COVID for probably the next six to twelve months or maybe even beyond that. Because of that, we need to find ways to help our businesses open safely while still protecting everyone but still being able to maintain their livelihoods, Sandra Ferri, President of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, told The Auroran shortly after the Province's announcement on Friday.

Our small businesses have really been suffering. It has really been hard for those who have been shut down to keep going. We're really pleased the retail sector is going into a capacity limit of 50 per cent. What we're still very concerned about is businesses in the hospitality industry, fitness and personal service sectors, where severe restrictions continue with limits of 10 people for indoor

hospitality and fitness centres regardless of how big the space is. We still have some concerns.?

Finding that balance is key and Ms. Ferri said having a ?very strict protocol in place for all? is necessary.

?I think our small businesses are doing a good job of maintaining protocol and we just need to give them the tools they need to make sure they continue to do that and keep everyone safe, while still being able to operate,? she said. ?They are eager to get their businesses open and to be working again.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter