

Gyms, restaurants expected to re-open Saturday

Gyms and indoor dining is set to resume this Saturday as the Province lifts York Region ? along with Ottawa and Peel ? out of a modified Stage 2 and into a new framework of restrictions announced Tuesday.

As of 12.01 a.m. on Saturday, November 7, York Region will move into a ?Restrict? (or ?Orange?) level, which will allow for new measures designed to minimize the risk of transmission of COVID-19 while allowing businesses to stay open in new ways.

?This will help us introduce preventative measures early,? said Premier Doug Ford, who announced the new framework alongside Deputy Premier (and Newmarket-Aurora MPP and Health Minister) Christine Elliott and David Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. ?We can start to transition regions away from modified stage 2 restrictions which were always intended as short-term measures. Based on current trends and the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, we're prepared as of Saturday, November 7, at 12.01 a.m. to move Ottawa, Peel and York Region to Restrict level. This means gyms and indoor dining will be open with capacity limits and restricted hours.?

Under the ?Restrict? level, restaurants and bars will have a maximum capacity of 50 people with four people allowed to sit together. Such businesses must close by 10 p.m., with liquor served only until 9 p.m. Gyms will also have a maximum of 50 people per facility, with limited duration of stay.

The new rules came just a day after Regional Council pressed the Province to allow restaurants, bars, gyms and recreational facilities to re-open ?as soon as possible? following recommendations from Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Chief Medical Officer of Health.

The Region approved the motion, which was moved by Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas and seconded by Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti, at a Special Council meeting on Monday.

Bars and restaurants, under the criteria approved by the Region, will be required to have all staff wear medical masks at all times, including areas where the public does not have access, for both indoor and outdoor dining; all patrons will have to wear face coverings or masks at all times for both indoor and outdoor dining, other than to take a drink or a bite of food; provide active screening of all patrons, including the collection of information for contact tracing; a new system for scheduled reservations and time limits for seatings wherever possible. Background music will also need to be lowered to below the level of conversation to reduce the chances of people speaking loudly.

The Region called on the Province to re-introduce the maximum capacity limits for gyms based on the facility's square footage; require all patrons to wear face masks or coverings unless engaged in vigorous physical activity; require all gym visits to be appointment-only rather than drop-in; carry out active screening for patrons, including temperature checks; and implement new cleaning procedures.

?Our daily case count is at an all-time high,? Dr. Kurji told Regional Council on Monday morning. ?Our incident rates are increasing, but we're coping. ?Our positivity rate is high, but we are coping. The number of institutional outbreaks is high and a few are large outbreaks, but the system is coping. Not all schools in outbreak have evidence of transmission. As some of the transmission has occurred outside the school settings. A number of schools under surveillance is high and an increasing number are in outbreak mode, but the system is coping. Childcare outbreaks are increasing, but we are coping. The number of workplace outbreaks is high, but we are coping. The three presidents of our hospitals have told me they are managing well with their COVID-19 case loads, however their ICUs are full of non-COVID patients and if there were to be an onslaught of COVID-19 patients, [they would] need to reduce admissions for other important areas that vary from hospital to hospital to create capacities.?

Between October 25 ? 31, Dr. Kurji said York Region is ?observing a plateau? in the rate of community transmissions, along with a declining rate of new cases between the 20 ? 50 age demographic. New cases have also plateaued among residents in their 40s, and although cases among individuals in their 30s continue to rise, the rate of increase has slowed.

"We all recognize that income is an important determinant of health and public health measures must be balanced between preventing COVID-19 cases and not doing damage to people's sources of livelihoods. We also appreciate the Province has this balance forefront in mind," said Dr. Kurji. "We acknowledge businesses such as restaurants and gyms have been taking steps to keep their businesses safe. We have all been listening. Since we do not expect our rates to come down fast any time soon, we have undertaken through a task force in Public Health to come up with ways whereby businesses could potentially open more safely in the face of high COVID-19 rates. We hope the Council will accept these recommendations in principle and recommend to the Province the adoption of some of these measures to help our businesses in York Region."

The recommendations from York Region's Chief Medical Officer of Health were subject to a debate of more than two hours at the start of the week as area representatives sought further information on the rationale behind the recommendations.

Mayor Mrakas, for instance, sought clarification on the use of masks for restaurant patrons while seated at their tables, as well as whether gyms and fitness centres could be given more latitude on their numbers if they are larger facilities.

"Some gyms are smaller, some are bigger," said Mayor Mrakas. "10 people in a 40,000 square foot facility, you figure you can fit more people in there comfortably and safely adhering to the protocol... was there any thought on [looking at] the maximum occupancy, as per the building code, and giving a percentage instead of a flat number right across the board?"

Dr. Kurji replied that while that suggestion made sense, that was a decision best left to the Province's experts.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter