

York Region avoids complete lockdown ? for now

As Toronto and Peel settle into another lockdown, which came into effect just after midnight on Monday, York Region continues to operate in the Red (?Control?) Zone.

York Region avoided a return to a full lockdown scenario on Friday afternoon after Regional Council made an impassioned, and largely successful, appeal to the Province to maintain the status quo.

Following a meeting of Regional Council on Thursday, York Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson and Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Medical Officer of Health, stated that while they ?appreciate? the Province's efforts to ?avoid further business closures while keeping our communities healthy and safe,? avoiding a lockdown would allow the Region to ?adequately balance public health with economic interests.?

?Regular public health inspections indicate the majority of our businesses continue to comply with current Red-Control zone public health measures,? they wrote in a joint statement. ?As well, our public demonstrates exceptionally high levels of compliance with measures such as wearing masks within public spaces. At the same time, York Region's three local hospitals have indicated they are sufficiently managing COVID-19 workload and have not seen evidence of capacity strains that would warrant further lockdown measures.

?Through resources provided by the Ministry of Health and the City of Kingston, York Region Public Health is currently reaching virtually 100 per cent of our positive cases on the day reports are received. Outbreaks in schools continue to be manageable and we are currently seeing a decline in workplace outbreaks across our cities and towns. It is our position that good case, contact and outbreak control management continues to be the most effective means of reducing new cases in the community.?

Prior to the letter being issued, Regional Council signed off on recommendations offered by Dr. Kurji to keep York in the Red Zone, along with a commitment to increase enforcement activities with local police and municipal bylaw departments where issues like overcrowding and lack of physical distancing are being reported.

Such environments include malls, grocery stores, big box outlets, and banquet halls.

?As has been implemented for restaurants and bars, we support the Province's consideration of additional measures to ensure proper distancing and further measures are put in place to restrict the spread of COVID-19 in establishments such as malls, large outlets and banquet halls,? they continued. ?Our small businesses in York Region ? as is the case right across Ontario ? continue to do everything asked of them to stay open and keep their customers, themselves and their families safe.

?We all need to stand up for them and keep as many businesses open as much as possible. By working in collaboration with our partners at all levels of government, we are confident we can continue to protect the health and wellbeing of residents and bring our case numbers down.?

As the Province prepared to announce lockdown measures on Friday, York Region was grappling with 1,093 active cases of the virus and 41 outbreaks. On Friday alone, the Region saw 157 new cases reported with the total number of new cases between November 13 and November 20 clocking in at 1,054.

But it wasn't the complete maintenance of the status quo for communities like York Region that remain in the Red Zone. Gathering limits for all organized public events and social gatherings have been further limited to 5 people indoors and 25 people outdoors, with stricter measures in place for religious gatherings.

?Across the Province in the last week, hospitalizations have increased by 22 per cent,? said the Premier. ?Intensive care admissions grew by over 50 per cent. We are now teetering on the edge of having to delay scheduled surgeries. In fact, some hospitals like

Scarborough Health Network are already having to delay surgeries.

I have been clear on this: the situation is extremely serious. Further action is required to avoid the worst-case scenario where the rate of community spread is greatest, the risk to our schools, our long-term care homes, hospitals is the greatest. We cannot put in-class learning at risk. We can't risk widespread outbreaks in our long-term care homes. We can't risk overwhelming our hospitals. To protect the most vulnerable, to protect what matters most, we have to get the community spread under control.

Since September, following the advice of our health experts, we have taken incremental steps. We have taken decisive steps to slow the spread by introducing public health restrictions, increasing testing and contact tracing and enforcement. At the same time, we have invested billions in dollars to increase capacity in our healthcare system. These steps, they have helped thanks to our collective efforts. We have saved lives, but this virus, it spreads like wildfire. In certain parts of the Province, it is spreading at an alarming rate in the community. Last week, our modelling showed that if nothing was done, we could face 6,000 new daily cases in the coming weeks, overwhelming our ICUs shortly after that. More deaths, more losses, but we can avoid this if we take further action now.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter