

Caledon lifts mask requirements under Ontario's new rules

By **Mark Pavilons**

Caledon has lifted its mandatory mask rules, following Provincial and Regional health directions.

Councillors repealed its mask bylaw and COVID-19 emergency order after hearing from Peel's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Lawrence Loh, during a special virtual Council meeting Monday night.

While masks are optional, Town staff will keep up the rigorous cleaning and disinfecting of all facilities.

Caledon CAO Carey Herd noted staff will still be asked to carry masks, and "mirror" the choice of residents who come into the administration centre.

Mayor Allan Thompson was also assured that community vaccination and booster clinics will remain in place. Dr. Loh said the Ministry of Health encourages the continuation of clinics, to serve those who are not fully vaccinated.

Loh said the Region will likely include other services, such as traditional, historic vaccines.

Ward 1 Regional Councillor Ian Sinclair was leery of dropping the mask mandate at this time in the face of COVID surges in other parts of the world.

Dr. Loh said while these cases are concerning, Canada's vaccination rate is much higher than those impacted countries.

He admitted that masking has been effective in reducing the spread, and those who are at risk should still wear them. Certain situations and environments still require masks, and Dr. Loh said as a matter of courtesy, he plans to wear his in places like movie theatres.

Ward 1 Area Councillor Lynn Kiernan wanted to know whether we've exited the pandemic, and entered an endemic stage. Dr. Loh said we're approaching that stage. He also told the Councillor that our vaccinations are sufficient to combat the newest Omicron variant.

She lauded Dr. Loh for his team's service and dedication through the pandemic.

Mayor Thompson wanted to know whether the Township can get rid of the plexiglass barriers and Dr. Loh said the job now is preventing COVID's severity, not its spread. It's up to the municipality to make the call and be flexible.

Dr. Loh said the efforts now are concentrated on those who have not been infected or fully vaccinated. He recommends that everyone be tripled vaccinated.

"Please don't become a statistic," he said of those who aren't fully vaccinated.

Mayor Thompson also praised Dr. Loh's efforts, noting he "really stepped up. You got us through it, and you never forgot Caledon."

Working on our side is the approaching warmer weather; that hinders the spread of the virus.

The virus may resurface or get worse later this fall, but until then, we need to remain vigilant.

While no longer mandatory, "now is not the time to throw away the masks," Dr. Loh said.

The Omicron variant has waned in Peel and Caledon and Loh observed that given our strong track record, it's always important to make the right decisions at the right times.

The early measures and quick response to the virus made all the difference and Peel has fared better than other municipalities. Dr. Loh praised local public health staff and local political leadership.

We have attained a strong population-wide immunity and even if it returns, the risks are far lower for the majority of citizens.

Dr. Loh said Peel Public Health staff are taking time to recover from the hectic workload over the past 800 days. The reality is, he said, it may take years to recover from, and restore, service levels to those before the pandemic.

CAO Herd added that as the Town rolls back requirements, capacity limits and social distancing will all change.

More information will be coming after most remaining restrictions are removed March 28.

She noted the hybrid format of Council meetings will continue, but members of the public are welcome to attend meetings in the Council chambers.

The hybrid work model for staff will also continue and Herd vowed that their number one priority is customer service and staff will continue to be available to the public.

She acknowledged the contributions of staff through the pandemic.

Thompson echoed those sentiments, noting everyone from emergency personnel to every staff member stepped up and did their part.

He asked the public to remain patient during the transition, but he assured residents that work is getting done.