

Chamber concerned with lack of plan and support for small business with Ontario moving back to Stage 2

By Rob Paul

With the Omicron variant leading to Ontario seeing record highs in COVID-19 cases, the Provincial Government announced new restrictions that went into effect Wednesday, January 4, at midnight.

The new measures in place will have a direct impact on businesses across the province with many of the restrictions leading to either closures or reduce capacity limits.

Among the new measures that will directly impact business are closing indoor dining at restaurants, bars and other food or drink establishments.

Outdoor dining with restrictions, takeout, drive through and delivery is permitted; retail settings, including shopping malls, permitted at 50 per cent capacity. For shopping malls, physical distancing will be required in line-ups, loitering will not be permitted, and food courts will be required to close; personal care services permitted at 50 per cent capacity and other restrictions; restricting the sale of alcohol after 10 p.m. and the consumption of alcohol on-premise in businesses or settings after 11 p.m. with delivery and takeout; closing indoor sport and recreational fitness facilities including gyms,

In a statement, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce voiced its concerns with the lack of plan and continued long-term impacts moving back into Stage 2 will have on local businesses across the province.

"We recognize that public health and a healthy economy are intrinsically linked; however, sweeping new restrictions impacting employers, workers, and families unaccompanied by immediate and commensurate supports is unacceptable nearly two years into the pandemic," said Rocco Rossi, President of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

"We need a comprehensive plan that ties restrictions to clear, data-based metrics so that employers, workers, and families can plan ahead. We are all doing our part. Now, government needs to do their part. What additional steps does the government plan to take over the next 21 days and beyond? Newly imposed public health measures intended to control the spread of the Omicron variant should always be met with immediate, commensurate and targeted relief, particularly for small businesses, many of whom cannot afford any further reduction in revenue."

With many businesses expecting potential new measures this week, Caledon Chamber of Commerce President Anthony Caputo says they didn't see them being this extreme and expected any restrictions to coincide with a re-opening plan.

"Businesses all over Ontario are really pissed off right now," said Caputo. "Everyone feels that although the Omicron variant is very contagious and spreads like wildfire, it's not as deadly and it's more like getting a regular common cold than anything else. We know that they want to keep ICU levels down and that they've gone up dramatically over the past weekend, that matters, but from the very beginning they said kids' immune systems are much stronger, and they withstand the COVID virus much better than the elderly, and so why aren't they in school right now?"

"Closing schools leads to the justification of closing businesses, and business wise, we need to learn how to adapt rather than taking the easy way out. Gyms should not be closed; they should be at 50 per cent capacity rather than completely shut down."

With many restaurants being hit hard over the last 22 months, the return of indoor dining was huge for revenue, but Caputo worries that to have it taken away again could put many owners in a hole they can't climb out of with no clear end date.

"I'm at least glad it happened at this time of the year because usually during this time of the year people are paying off their bills and

not really going to restaurants as frequently. But at the same time, any revenue stream that's taken away from any type of business, especially when they've been held back for the past two years, is always going to have a dramatic impact on them. They've been going through this for two years already and there's no end in sight. There will be a lot of restaurants who this time around won't reopen again coming out of this because there's no point.?

According to Caputo, many local businesses are concerned that even when measures are lessened, it will happen again because that's been the trend thus far. He says there's always something always in the way and many businesses are tired of the constant reset.

?Of course, everyone is worried it will continue because I don't think the government?at all levels?has learned how to pivot and adapt,? said Caputo. ?Moving backwards is the easy way out and, unfortunately, the easy way out it is going to hurt our economy dramatically.?

With the province reverting back to Stage 2, businesses fear that being one step away from Stage 1 could lead to a lockdown in the near future, and even for retailers coming off Christmas, Caputo doesn't know if local retailers can survive with competition from big box stores and e-commerce.

?It's good that it's happening now rather than before the holidays, but this is still going to be a hit for every business owner's income for the next month or so while we're in this stage. You can only survive so long on e-commerce as a local retailer and with takeout for restaurants, you really still need the in-person aspect of the business to really turn a profit. Right now, most businesses are lucky if they're breaking even. Obviously, it's different for corporations, they're still thriving, but small business I truly feel really bad for them because this isn't easy. This is a shock to them and it's another kick to the gut. They don't see a light at the end of the tunnel right now.?

The move back to Stage 2 is especially concerning in Caputo's eyes if the government doesn't plan to announce support for businesses to stay on their feet over the next month.

?When it comes to the support aspect, the first two times around, there were grants and wage subsidies, and those types of things,? he said. ?But my worry is that I haven't heard anything in that realm quite yet. There hasn't been much regarding how the government is going to help business, especially small businesses survive the next couple months. Everyone still has rent to pay, and they all have utilities they need to pay, and I haven't seen anything substantial that will really push them through these times.?

As for the Chamber, Caputo is always working to recruit businesses to expand to Caledon, but the uncertainty around COVID has made the task more and more difficult with it being too risky for local businesses to make big moves during these times.

?I've had many conversations with very successful mom-and-pop businesses that I would personally love to see come into Caledon,? he said. ?Everyone is willing to sit down and listen to what we have to offer, and they all want to expand and they all want to grow their businesses, but the fact of the matter is that with these continued restrictions, they're not going to make any moves. Now, when it comes to corporations, they'll still make moves to help themselves and they're still going to come to Caledon to benefit from all the perks the town has to offer. But when it comes to smaller businesses, it's harder, especially if it's a restaurant or retail store and you know you'll be closed for a third of the year.

?Is it really feasible for those types of businesses to expand or even open up right now? I would have to agree with them when they say no. Don't get me wrong, corporations have paid their dues and they've been successful, and you can't fault them for being successful, but at the same time, we have to focus on small business and get them the help to survive. We need to actually be supporting small local businesses and get them help because we need to start growing smaller businesses. If we don't have small local businesses, we're in trouble.?