

Chamber sees teaming up with local organizations as key to helping businesses bounce back from COVID-19

By Rob Paul

When the Province announced on February 14 that it would move forward with its phased reopening, first by loosening COVID-19 restrictions February 17 and then effectively removing restrictions on March 1, it became a sigh of temporary relief for small locally owned businesses.

For the last two years, businesses have toiled in the unknown as restrictions forced them to temporarily close, pivot, or in some cases shut down for good. Now, there's a glimmer of hope with an end date for capacity limits in indoor settings and the requirement to check each patron's proof of vaccination.

In Caledon, many businesses have been put in tough situations that it could take years to get out of, but, for now, Caledon Chamber of Commerce President Anthony Caputo says they're focused on the positive of working towards a semblance of normality.

"Everyone is extremely excited," said Caputo. "Whether you own a business or not, everyone wants the mandates to be lifted, no matter what political eye you have on the world these days. We have to get back to normal or we may as well scrap everything and start from scratch because it's borderline going to become even more disastrous for businesses in this country."

Despite businesses being open and COVID-19 measures having little impact going forward, the hole they're in financially is going to be a tough one to climb out of and Caputo doesn't think they can handle anymore back and forth with restrictions.

"It's so important to stay open," he said. "The amount of debt they've racked up just to keep the doors open is astronomical. I've talked to some business owners, especially the mom-and-pop shops and independently owned businesses, that are still fighting to stay alive. I know a few restaurant owners in Caledon that have racked up a heavy bill in order to stay open and they actually regret staying open. They said if they had shut down and collected unemployment, they would probably be in a better spot, but they believe in their product and they didn't want to give up. I've got to commend businesses for not giving up."

Ultimately, one of the biggest recurring problems of the pandemic for these businesses has been lack of clear government support and, even with the reopening, Caputo would still like to see the government step up.

"Everyone would love some sort of support but what we've seen from the government, support wise, has been extremely difficult to obtain," said Caputo. "Once the government said okay to giving businesses some money to help stay open, they had to sign up for it and wait a month. They were kind of late to the party. This was with all levels of government. I felt like this whole pandemic, we hit two different extremes with federal giving too much money to all different types of people who didn't need it and the people who really did need it had to fight just to get something and it was too hard to get."

From the Chamber's perspective, the most important thing going forward is working with other organizations in Caledon to do everything they can to keep businesses afloat to reinvigorate the local economy.

"Right now, our main focus is to support businesses that are around now and help them any way we can," he said. "It's great to bring in new business but we have businesses here that have been here for a long time that deserve our help and we're committed to doing whatever it takes to help them. The Chamber is taking a different approach to doing things and we want to join forces with other associations, in Town and help each other in helping everyone in the community this year. There's been too much divide with the associations but I'm convinced now more than ever we need to and unless we help each other we're all going to be gone. United we stand, divided we fall."