

Community has been Chamber of Commerce's biggest ally throughout the pandemic

By Rob Paul

On the heels of the Government of Ontario announcing a three-step reopening approach after enacting a stay-at-home order that began April 8, small businesses throughout the Caledon community have felt the harsh impact of pivoting to partial and remote operations.

With Ontario's reopening plan kicking off over the long weekend with outdoor facilities like golf courses and tennis courts being authorized for use, businesses are hopeful the reopening will stay on track. Step one of the reopen is set for June 14 and includes outdoor dining with up to four people and non-essential retail at 15 per cent capacity.

Each step for the province will last at least 21 days, but if vaccinations continue to trend in a positive direction, step two will see the reopening of personal care services and an increase to six people for outdoor dining and step three will allow for indoor dining as well as recreational facilities to open. This marks the first sign of progress for local businesses in Caledon to begin preparing for a return to normal.

A key supporter for business throughout the country during these tough times are their local chambers of commerce.

Caledon's has tried to be there every step of the way to help where they can in unifying business owners and keeping them in the know of what's going on at the Federal and Provincial levels.

Anthony Caputo, President of the Caledon Chamber of Commerce, is glad to see things are beginning to trend in a positive direction but knowing how rapidly things have changed with COVID-19 it's not time to celebrate yet.

"It's not easy living in the unknown, if we have no information to give them," he said. "I don't think it's fair that we keep getting these postponements and all we're doing is dragging these businesses through the mud. Luckily, a lot of them are being resilient, but, at the same time, you can only go so long until you throw in the towel and give up."

It's been an impossible and unprecedented situation for businesses world-wide and Caputo credits Caledon businesses rallying together throughout the pandemic as a clear reason there's still light on the other end of the tunnel.

"They're frustrated (members of the chamber), but honestly, I have different businesses reaching out that are willing to lend support to other businesses to help out. The camaraderie and sense of community that we're seeing right now in regard to businesses helping other businesses is pretty impressive. The ones that are still doing well and prospering are actually giving us a call and asking, 'How can we help the chamber? How can we help other businesses that need a hand?'"

It's easy to find the negatives in the situation, but Caputo believes it's important to look at some of the positives to come out of it and one of the most important positives is the teamwork he has seen. He's been blown away by the willingness of local businesses to help others that are struggling where they can.

"It's huge," he said. "The fact that instead of everyone thinking about themselves, they're reaching out and wanting to help other businesses in the community. That goes to show you how great the community strength is alone, that people haven't felt in a long, long time and knowing that it's still there is a great step forward."

It hasn't been easy for the chamber either, says Caputo; they've felt the struggle with pivoting into unknown circumstances. Unable to help as much as they wish they could, they're starting to find their footing after consulting with other chambers and working with the government to get their member businesses more assistance.

‘We have our hands tied as well,’ he said. ‘For us, we’re pretty much starting from scratch with getting organized and trying to support businesses the best we can, but little by little we’re coming together. We’ve been able to talk to other chambers and having the government give us rapid tests to give to smaller businesses is going to be a big step forward in helping us support these businesses.’

Although the reopening plan is cause for positivity, Caputo wants to see more done. Some of the inconsistencies in the reopening are an issue and he and the chamber are going to do their best to ensure the government understands more can be done in a safe manner to help local economies bounce back sooner.

‘We’re going to be petitioning the government to start opening things up, especially outdoor dining’ with the good weather coming there’s no reason for these restaurants to stay closed especially the ones who aren’t able to do anything else,’ he said. ‘As well as opening up outdoor sports’ even just for the public because it’s going to be very important, especially for everyone’s mindsets. Everyone needs to get out.’

Given how difficult the pandemic has been for everyone, Caputo isn’t willing to point fingers with some of the past problems in reopening decisions. He knows the government has been put into an impossible spot and is just glad to see that things are seemingly shifting towards normalcy.

‘It’s frustrating for everybody, but there’s one thing we all need to understand, this virus is always changing,’ he said. ‘It’s not telling us, ‘Hey, this is the way it’s going to be’ and we adapt to it and it’s done. We always have to be adapting to the changes the virus brings. It sucks and we’re all frustrated and we’re all in the same boat and want to get back to normal, but unfortunately this is the hand we’ve been dealt. Everyone makes mistakes and I can’t see any government doing better with this. So, how do you fault someone that is dealing with a virus that comes every hundred years?’

For more information about the Caledon Chamber of Commerce, visit caledonchamberofcommerce.ca/ and for more information regarding Ontario’s three-step reopening plan visit www.ontario.ca/page/reopening-ontario.