

Council moves to extend face-covering bylaw until Sept. 30, specifies definition of what's a proper mask

By Rob Paul

Although vaccination milestones are continuing to be achieved, due to the Region of Peel's high rate of community transmission and the continued high-impact of the variant, Caledon Council passed a motion to extend the Town face-covering by-law until September 30, 2021.

The definition of masks was based on data and science that we were seeing and was not intended to be punitive; it was intended to equip our residents with the knowledge around how best they can protect themselves and each other," said Dr. Lawrence Loh, Peel's Medical Officer of Health. "At this late juncture in the pandemic, none of us want to see us go backwards, especially with the more transmissible Delta variant. All of us just want to make sure that as we reopen, we are still maintaining the appropriate levels of protection which will give us reassurance as we get to two dose vaccine coverage that our reopening will be able to continue with confidence."

With the passing of the bylaw, the definition of face-covering was also updated to ensure that proper masks are being worn in the community.

The new definition reads, "'Face Mask' means a mask or face covering, without an exhalation valve(s), that can be well secured to the head or ears, cannot easily move or slip out of place, and is large enough to completely and comfortably cover the mouth, nose and chin without gaping. For greater clarity, a Face Mask may include, but is not required to be, a medical mask such as surgical masks, N95 or other masks required by healthcare workers. A Face Mask does not include a face shield, scarf, bandana, neck gaiter or neck warmer."

As people become more burnt out over COVID-19 restrictions, Councillor Johanna Downey rose concerns that she had heard from members of the Caledon community regarding the specificity of the face-coverings residents are being asked to use.

"It came to our attention in our review that many of the outbreaks that had occurred—particularly in certain workplaces and areas in the community—were as a result on inadequate masking, specifically masks that did not hold back droplets and served not to function," said Loh. "When we were seeing this in the course of our data and our outbreak investigations, the recommendation from our team was to actually update the masking bylaws. We were considering bringing this in the midst of the third wave, but unfortunately for obvious reasons we had many other pressing needs at the height of the third wave. This is about education and messaging to our residents about how they can keep themselves and their loved ones safe while we get through this final phase of the pandemic to really ensure our reopening continues without a hitch."

Councillor Jennifer Innis asked Loh why this change to which masks are acceptable is coming now this deep into the pandemic because she's worried there will be a lack of understanding of why specific masks are being encouraged now and wants there to be mask education available to residents.

"The Public Health Agency of Canada came out during the second wave strongly in favour of what was previously called a three-layer mask because they're well fitted and meant to contain droplets," said Loh. "That recommendation only grew stronger as we entered the third wave and subsequently saw our data. It has been some time since the recommendations from the federal level have changed and it hasn't been augmented with our own experience and data, so I can certainly take this back to my team and see what is planned in respect to education. I will confirm they have plans to broadly disseminate the rationale for the updated masks at this time."

The new bylaw is set until the end of September, but Loh reminds residents that it could come to an end sooner for fully vaccinated residents, if the Town and Region reach two-dose vaccination thresholds.

?I'm hopeful that as we get to more fully vaccinated coverage within our community and the Region of Peel, the Province will be able to issue guidance, particularly around what people who are fully vaccinated can and can't do?especially around precautions such as masking,? said Loh. ?While the proposal is to extend to September, things may change in the months to come. The sooner we get to broader two-dose vaccine coverage, the sooner many of these precautions hopefully resolve all together.?