

Feeling Torn

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Admittedly what I am about to comment on is not only a Caledon concern. However, with significant and ongoing issues related to traffic safety throughout our region, I do believe it's a particularly pressing matter here, but also one that's also leaving me feeling torn. What has me in such distress? Mr. Ford's recent 're-announcement' of his government's plan to allow beer, wine, cider and spirits to be sold in convenience stores.

First, and perhaps not really important in the grand scheme of things, I question the timing of his announcement. Was it a ploy to avoid the more important discussion of the investigation into the ongoing greenbelt land release saga? The Conservatives do, after all, have a long history of baiting and switching the media to draw attention away from negative stories while promoting 'positive' news. That it was also yet another announcement made on a Friday (something the PCs also seem particularly adept at doing) fuels my scepticism, as did various media outlets suggesting this might have been a snap election focussed announcement. But I digress.

No, my main concern with this announcement and the reason I am feeling torn reflects my general sense that while it is about time we had a little less control over where we buy alcohol, less control opens the door to abuse, in this case abuse that could be deadly. Bringing us in line with countries around the world, and even with other Canadian provinces, by allowing the sale of beer, wine and spirits anywhere, including outside of LCBO and Beer Store outlets, reflects the principal notion that we are all responsible adults. It provides access to substances that are already approved for retail sale, but not always readily available at a time that is convenient for all consumers. Expanding sales might also lead to enhanced selection, variety and competitive pricing, perhaps even making it easier for local craft brewers, cider and wine makers to get their product to market. These are all favourable potential outcomes.

However, what some might suggest is the current flagrant abuse of alcohol sales by some licensed retailers, combined with what seems to be a coincidental rise in impaired driving charges, is what's really of concern. Are we trading freedom of choice for an increased risk of serious injury or death on area roads? According to CAMH there are already '6,000 alcohol-attributable deaths a year in Ontario,' and they fear these changes 'will significantly increase this number.'

The Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario, on its website, notes that 'to provide ongoing flexibility for customers and retail stores...the permissible hours of liquor sales in retail stores will remain 7:00am - 11:00pm.' This change took place during Covid but I'm sure, like me, Caledon residents have noticed the long lines that sometimes form outside certain LCBO convenience outlets in Town at all hours of the day and night. The AGCO site goes on to say it 'remains committed to protecting public safety and ensuring that liquor is sold, served, delivered and consumed in a responsible manner. Licensees must also ensure that any persons involved in the sale or delivery of liquor have completed Smart Serve training.' I have to wonder if that's true of the many part-time young adults swiping your groceries or the person behind the counter printing off your gas receipt while also selling you a six-pack?

In a report to Council earlier this year, Caledon OPP noted an increase of over 100% in fatal motor vehicle accidents from 2022, to 2023. Violations of the Liquor License Act increased by 52% over the same timeframe. That's not to say every accident was the result of impaired driving but the report, presented to Council by Chief Inspector MaryLouise Kearns, included this statement following one Councillor's comment about drunk drivers: 'Kearns agreed and said she can't believe the amount of people who are driving impaired. She said harsher penalties should be implemented by the courts for impaired drivers.' (As reported in the March 28, 2024 edition of this paper)

More recently, 'officers from the Caledon OPP have charged six drivers with impaired operation related charges over this past Victoria Day long weekend.' These offenses are taking place across Caledon from Highway 10, through Caledon Village, to the Mayfield West area, Humber Station Road and Innis Lake Road (to name just a few.) It is not, in other words, an isolated problem. Finally, it is being reported too that the number of people driving with open liquor in their vehicles has also increased dramatically.

These are frightening statistics. They should concern anyone, and I would argue, particularly those of us who are already concerned

about the state of safety on Caledon roads as a result of the increased volume of truck traffic and adjacent truck yards; the amount of aggregate traffic and the increased number of stunt driving charges also seen on area roads. With even easier access to alcohol, are we putting ourselves more at risk than ever before? Yes, I'd like to think most of us are responsible adults and the freedom of choice on where, how and when to do our shopping (for booze or otherwise) is a right most of us expect and appreciate. But I can't help but be worried at what cost?