

Ontario is ready for legal cannabis, Mulronee says

Written By MARK PAVILONS

The province stands ready to ease the transition to legalized marijuana.

The recreational use of pot became legal Wednesday.

Addressing the Empire Club of Canada Oct. 9, York-Simcoe MPP and Attorney General Caroline Mulronee said social effects associated with consuming recreational cannabis will not magically disappear and they are all very much top of mind.

"The risks to our children, our roads and our communities are real" and we are committed to addressing them," she said.

"Time was of the essence because the federal government had dictated the legalization date and we knew we needed to develop a new plan to protect children and youth, keep our roads safe and combat the criminal market in Ontario.

"To provide certainty on each of these priorities, we spoke directly with

Ontarians about their concerns regarding the federal government's decision and how to enforce and oversee this federal government decision in a responsible and reasonable manner."

Mulronee noted that in mid-August, she and Minister Fedeli announced Ontario would move to a robust private retail system, and away from the previous government's public retail model with stores run by government employees in locations chosen by the government.

"We concluded that such a system was incapable of seriously competing with the illegal market and in turn would leave our communities more vulnerable and susceptible to the underground market ... we developed a retail and regulatory framework designed to fulfill our three objectives: protecting children, keeping roads safe and combatting the illegal market."

The Province proposed to establish the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario as the provincial regulator to oversee the licensing and compliance process.

"In our consultations, it was clear that municipalities and police stakeholders

were supportive of the AGCO as the province-wide regulator for private cannabis retail sales in Ontario."

Mulronee admitted that while new resources will be needed to help get the AGCO up and running in the short-term, ultimately they expect the licensing regime to run on a sustainable cost-recovery basis. Establishing the AGCO as a province-wide regulator also benefits smaller municipalities who could not implement their own municipal licensing regime, primarily due to lack of administrative infrastructure.

"This approach also means the AGCO can provide communities and operators more certainty through a one-stop licensing approach rather than allowing a patch work of municipal licensing regimes to spread across Ontario. In order to best compete with the illegal market, our government made the decision that the number of licenses for cannabis retail stores would not be capped, but instead would be issued based on market demand.

"I want to underscore the fact that the proposed legislation would also include regulation-making authority to set concentration limits for how many retail store licenses a single operator can hold to ensure diversity in the market. So our approach to this issue will certainly evolve as we gather more information from stakeholders and as we see the market take shape.

"We want to ensure that only responsible and accountable individuals are participating in the licensed retail framework.

"It is my view that the system we have proposed provides an opportunity for small and medium size businesses to compete in this legal retail space, which we believe is the best way to drive out the illegal market."

Mulronee noted that the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and in regional consultations held MPPs, revealed that a "one-size fits all approach" of the previous government "was not the right way forward. Municipalities wanted a provincial framework with an opportunity for local input.

"We heard this message on two key elements of our policy.

"One, where stores can be located, and two, where people can consume cannabis.

"First, municipalities will decide whether there will be any stores in their communities at all. Each municipal council will have the opportunity to opt-out of having bricks and mortar retail stores in their communities. Those decisions will need to be made by Jan. 22 of next year. That gives each council three months from the municipal election date to make this decision, and the decision date is five months after we announced our intention to move to a private retail model."

At a recent council meeting, King has decided to opt out of the retail plan.

Nobody in Ontario has the right to a cannabis retail license, she pointed out.

The AGCO's due-diligence process will be strictly applied and thoroughly enforced, and the role of public commentary in this process is real. Before you pick your store locations, be mindful of the importance of local responses that can be provided within the

15-day comment window.

The government has largely aligned the rules for cannabis consumption with the tobacco restrictions under the Smoke Free Ontario Act.

This approach prohibits smoking and vaping of cannabis in areas where the smoking of tobacco is also prohibited, such as playgrounds, child care facilities, schools and hospitals.

Our approach also allows local municipalities to enact bylaws that further restrict smoking cannabis beyond the provincial minimum standards in places like parks.

Once again, these proposed amendments have been crafted after consultations across the province and are designed to allow each of Ontario's 444 municipalities to shape consumption rules that work for them.

The government has already launched an awareness campaign, to educate and communicate with people regarding applicable rules, regulations and health and safety measures.

We will plainly tell Ontarians how our children, communities and roads will be protected, and how we will work to combat criminals. Our messages will be apparent and accessible where people live and commute, on social media and where they view content online, on television, and across university and college campuses.

Mulroney knows that many people will be looking for as much information as possible now that cannabis is legal. Go to Ontario.ca/cannabis homepage for more detailed information and resources.

We are confident that when taken together, our proposed licensing model, overseen by the AGCO, the flexibility and certainty we are providing to local communities, and the public awareness campaign I shared with you today are the best way forward to achieve our objectives.

Collectively, our determination to work with communities across Ontario to address the health and social risks associated to cannabis consumption has not wavered for a single day because we all understand what is at stake.