

King, York move into the red-control zone

By Mark PavilonsEditorLocal Journalism Initiative

A call by York's medical officer of health saw Premier Doug Ford move the region into the red zone Monday. The premier announced Friday that the stay-at-home order for York has been lifted. The region has just started to transition to the colour-coded framework. Red-Control measures allow capacity of 75% for supermarkets and other stores that primarily sell groceries, convenience stores, pharmacies. 50% for all other retail, including, but not limited to discount and big box retailers, liquor stores, hardware stores and garden centres. The stay-at-home order and all existing public health and workplace safety measures for an additional two weeks in the Toronto and Peel Public Health Regions, along with the North Bay-Parry Sound District. "Our government's number one priority is the safety of all individuals and families, and that's why we are taking a gradual, cautious approach to returning regions to the Framework," said Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. "These are difficult but necessary decisions, in order to protect against COVID-19 variants and maintain the progress we have all made together. Until vaccines are widely available, we continue to urge all Ontarians to follow public health advice and measures, and stay home, stay safe, and save lives." In nearby Caledon (Peel), the stay-at-home order will continue to apply until at least Monday, March 8. After returning to the Framework, public health regions are required to stay in their level for at least two weeks. The government will then assess the impact of public health and workplace safety measures to determine if the region should stay where it is or be moved to a different level. Public health regions may be moved to a higher level within the two-week window, if necessary, based on the set indicators and thresholds outlined in the Framework. In addition, Ontario has introduced an "emergency brake" to allow the Chief Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the local medical officer of health, to immediately advise moving a region into Grey-Lockdown to interrupt transmission. "While the health indicators have improved enough to allow us to return an additional region to the Framework, we are not yet at the point where we can safely transition back the remainder of the province," said Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health. "Everyone is strongly advised to continue staying at home, avoid social gatherings, only travel between regions for essential purposes, and limit close contacts to your household or those you live with regardless of which level of the Framework you are in." The Province allowed York to transition, largely due to a plea by its Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Karim Kurji. Earlier in the week, Kurji pointed out it's clear businesses are suffering greatly and with that comes loss of jobs and incomes, an important social determinant of health. "We are seeing social isolation leading to mental illness. We are also observing some underground activity for disease transmission; for example, personal service workers doing nails in people's homes transmitting the variant disease." He pointed out York Region's incidence rates have been dropping and plateauing. "Our outbreaks in the long-term care institutions have dropped from immunization efforts and we are continuing to push aggressively with our immunizations as vaccine supplies become available," Dr. Kurji said. "We know York Region resident hospitalizations have been going down too; however, they are still quite pressurized and taking patients from across the province." The wild card has been the variant: we have around 258 variant of concern cases; 62 are active and the remainder have recovered; 7 are hospitalized and sadly there has been 1 death. "We have been looking at the increase in the number of variants in many epidemiological ways: doubling times, shape of the cumulative cases graphs and proportional variants on a daily basis; however, we are not seeing explosive growth at this point but we will continue to monitor this closely." Dr. Kurji admitted York has seen large numbers of variant cases early on around Christmas, but with aggressive case and contact management, interventions at the borders and the public's help in following public health guidelines, "we have a reasonable handle on these cases." Our message is quite clear: still stay home, only go out for essential visits, maintain physical distance, keep encounters brief, wash your hands and be sure to wear a mask. "With enhanced restrictions in the Red-Control Zone, along with our strategies for aggressive case and contact investigation and enforcement, we can keep this in check." The new tool in our toolbox are the vaccines; we are moving aggressively to vaccinate as many as possible within the province's identified priority populations, as vaccine supply becomes available.