

New Tecumseth shuts down facilities in response to COVID-19

The Town of New Tecumseth is taking measures to prepare for COVID-19 as cases continue to grow rapidly across the province.

"Obviously, this is impacting our community greatly and it will continue to do so. At this point in time I don't really have a lot of good news with where this is heading," said Town CAO Blaine Parkin at Monday night's Council meeting.

"From everything that I'm seeing and hearing and discussing around the area whether it be the medical officer of health or our colleagues . . . things will continue to deteriorate before they get better so we have a long road ahead of us, but we will come through the other side and we will be fine," he added.

As of Monday evening, all Town-operated facilities shut down and at the earliest they will re-open is on April 6. This includes recreational facilities, cultural facilities and libraries.

As April 6 approaches, Parkin said the Town will re-evaluate where it currently sits, with respect to COVID-19.

"The idea behind all of this is to try and get ahead of the virus," he stressed.

"We know that there will be increasing levels of spread of the virus, we know that it's nowhere near what it ultimately will be but everything that we're doing now is trying to blunt that peak and reduce that total impact."

Early on Friday morning, the Town activated its emergency operations centre in response to COVID-19. The Town's emergency control, which is made up of council and staff, has also convened.

"Every decision we're currently making is being coordinated through that control group with our goal of having the organization and its employees and the community ? all of its residents ? as knowledgeable and as prepared as possible for the challenges that were undertaking right now," said Town CAO Blaine Parkin at Monday night's meeting.

"What I would say is, all of our actions are based on the best science that we know, a lot of discussions with the medical officer of health, whether it be for the province, or whether it be for our Simcoe Muskoka District Area."

Parkin said the Town is encouraging every person in the community to self monitor "literally everyday" and check up on their family members,

loved ones, children, and seniors to ensure there's a proper response if symptoms arise.

In the event someone does develop symptoms, follow what the Simcoe Muskoka District Public Health Unit (SMDHU) is recommending and avoid going to the doctor or hospital, Parkin stressed

?Call Tele-Health Ontario [1-866-797-0000] or call the public health unit [705-721-7520] and you'll be guided through the steps that you need to take if symptoms are occurring,? he explained.

Currently, the Town is engaged in discussions with Stevenson Memorial Hospital to look at assessment screening sites for COVID-19 in Town, which would take pressure off of the hospital.

?We are working with them at this point in time and we will see what the next couple of days will hold with respect to developing that secondary screening site,? Parkin noted.

Other sites are being deployed across Simcoe County as well.

?The best thing that we can suggest people to do at this point is to be diligent, be careful, look after your families,? Parkin said.

He noted that social distancing, which is a fairly new term that refers to how close people are to one another, is becoming increasingly prevalent and is important for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

It was originally thought by health professionals to maintain one meter of distance from others when out in public but this has increased to two.

That's why the Ontario Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David Williams announced last Friday that there should be an immediate suspension of all events greater than 250 people, Parkin noted.

However, on Monday night, SMDHU medical officer of health, Dr. Charles Gardner recommended gatherings be limited to under 50.

Dr. Gardner's recommendations align with Dr. Williams, who is urging that dine-in restaurants close or switch to takeout, delivery, or drive through methods.

Meanwhile, reductions in staffing levels for the municipality, amidst the COVID-19 outbreak will require the town to prioritize its most critical services.

?We are anticipating staff levels to start to drop this week and only continue to deteriorate in the weeks ahead . . . to what level is

a little unclear at this point," Parkin remarked.

"Whether that's through illness or self isolation, which we do have a number of staff that we are already seeing in that situation, or through staying at home with their children because of the closure of the schools."

The Town is preparing for a 25 to 50 percent reduction, which Parkin said might seem large, but in this situation is actually realistic.

Councillor Fran Sainsbury raised concerns around local minor hockey teams end-of-year celebrations in June and if they will be cancelled, provided the COVID-19 outbreak drags on to that point.

As of March 12, the Ontario Minor Hockey Association suspended all hockey activities and effective March 13, Hockey Canada has cancelled all sanctioned activities, including national championships, until further notice.

Parkin said while this might be a stressful time for many, it is important to be knowledgeable and prepared as things develop.

"I can appreciate that people are nervous, they are anxious, they don't know what all of this means ultimately to themselves and their organizations, and their families, and their children, and that certainly is a concern to all of us," he noted.

"Act accordingly, help those in need that you know of but just be patient with us as well, there are a series of things we are working through as an organization to manage priorities," Parkin added.

"It's not that anyone or any group or anything is not important, it's just a matter of having to manage priorities as they come and as they need to be addressed."

To get educated on precautions and what the town's doing with respect to the virus, visit its website at: www.newtecumseth.ca where you can find the latest updates.

"Because the information is rapidly changing, by the hour, if not sooner, I would encourage everyone to continually check the website, there is information being posted there quite regularly and [we're] updating it as often as we can," said Parkin.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter