

Residents shouldn't fear recently reopened businesses: MPP Jim Wilson

The COVID-19 lockdown forced some Simcoe County businesses to shut down permanently, while others exhausted their savings to survive. These businesses now have a shred of hope under Ontario's Stage 2 Reopening Plan, which went into effect last Friday.

But as the 'new normal' for commerce comes to light, some residents are concerned about contracting COVID-19 at newly reopened establishments in their community.

However, the businesses that were forced to close have the largest incentive to keep people safe, as it's their only barrier to creating positive cash flows, according to Simcoe-Grey MPP Jim Wilson.

'It's in their interest as well as everyone else's that we get this thing nipped in the bud,' he noted. 'Our small business owners have suffered greatly during the pandemic and they need the revenue, we need the jobs to come back, and we need it not just for economic recovery but for mental health recovery as well.'

'That's one thing that I don't think got discussed very much or not enough during this pandemic.'

Over the past three months, a majority of the calls to Wilson's office aren't about the novel coronavirus, they're about mental health.

'People are stressed out and they want to get open and they want to get back to as normal as we can,' he said.

'Even early on I had an [ER] physician from a hospital tell me that we don't have the volumes we use to have but the volumes we do have are for mental health.'

Meanwhile, Wilson and Simcoe-Grey MP Terry Dowdall held a virtual consultation with leaders from the business sector to learn how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their operations and to gather ideas as Ontario restarts its economy.

Wilson said tourism-based businesses in New Tecumseth have endured some of the greatest loss since the start of the pandemic, particularly last month when they were forced to stay closed for the May 24 weekend.

'Many of them reported that they had no revenue throughout this period or others had negative revenue - they've had expenses with no money coming in,' Wilson noted.

In response to lost revenues, the Nottawasaga Inn and similar outfits are requesting extra funding to promote tourism.

'They would like to see more money for marketing, particularly marketing towards residents of Ontario for staycations' which will hopefully be the trend for the foreseeable future,' Wilson said.

Ontario's Ministry of Tourism, he added, announced new funding to market staycations, in an effort to help tourism related businesses recover - although it's not just tourism related businesses in need of extra support.

The business community as a whole has incurred many new and unexpected expenses associated with protecting staff and customers from COVID-19. Some of these expenses include installing plexiglass barriers and training staff on newly created safety procedures.

These expenses can be covered through government assistance such as the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA), which offers \$40,000 in interest free loans of which \$10,000 is forgivable if paid back by December 2022.

Yet, only a small number of eligible businesses have applied for this program since it was introduced on April 9, noted Wilson.

He said many business owners have been unaware that the program can help cover COVID-19 related costs and he's expressed to the provincial government that they need to make that message clearer.

Meanwhile, others in the business community who reopened last Friday under Ontario's Stage 2 Reopening Plan did so with less staff.

Leaders of the local business sector told Wilson they're struggling to rehire former employees due to concerns around safety.

"We need to get that confidence among employees because we need them back and my worry is there's going to be a shortage of workers even though we have a 13.7 percent record unemployment," he noted.

It's also essential to start weening unemployed Ontarians off of the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit to get them back to work and recover the economy, Wilson said.

Virtual consultations with the business sector are held once a week and anyone in Simcoe?Grey who wants to attend can email jwilson@ola.org and express their interest.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter