



Town of The Blue Mountains

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Sent via E-mail

May 12, 2021

The Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, 1 Queen's Park
Toronto, ON
M7A 1A1
Email: premier@ontario.ca

RE: Town of The Blue Mountains Community Recovery Task Force Request regarding Provincial Re-opening Strategy and Frontline Business Experience

Dear Premier,

I am writing to you at the direction of the Town of The Blue Mountains Community Recovery Task Force.

Let me begin by communicating our Council's appreciation for the difficult work you and your Cabinet have done to help manage public health in this extraordinary and unprecedented situation.

Our community is doing its best to comply with the 3rd lockdown in one year but there is an ever-increasing level of frustration and anxiety in our community because of the lack of a clearly communicated "exit plan" from this cycle of social and business restrictions. This "exit plan" needs to prioritize health outcomes, while giving clear direction to our residents and businesses on how we are going to emerge from this lockdown. I understand that the Province of Saskatchewan has just released their plan.

Local businesses, many of which have barely operated for 2 weeks during the last 5 months, are desperate for some sign of what the "new normal" will look like and how Ontario might get there. The COVID-19 Science Advisory table has recently advised you that if the stay-at-home order is lifted in the weeks and months ahead, daily cases would reach 10,000 cases a day by the beginning of July! There is no advice coming from that table on how our massive vaccination program can be a step toward some return to normalcy. I am writing to encourage you and your Cabinet to begin to lay out to the public your plan for how Ontarians can begin to return their lives back to some semblance of normal, whatever that "new normal" looks like.

Our local businesses have been community partners in health outcomes and COVID-19 transmission prevention from the beginning of the pandemic. They have implemented new operational protocols working closely with our Grey Bruce Public Health team. Many of our local businesses implemented standards that went above and beyond the public health guidelines. Our local businesses served as educators of the public to ensure that protocols were followed by visitors and guests.

Premier, our small businesses do their best to hire people, and they invest time and money in training and developing employees so that these employees can have a career. Our local small businesses hire extra part time staff where they can make some extra cash while going to school and summer break. However, our small businesses have become terrified to invest further in their businesses, drying up inventory orders that will have dramatic impacts on supply chains across many sectors. More importantly, this fear will shut down local employment and economic growth. The repeated opening and closing have forced our businesses to incur unrecoverable costs from lost perishable food items, training etc. and are not supported by current government programs.

Destinations, collaborative networks and municipalities across Ontario can work even closer with public health agencies and the Province to ensure that safety protocols are front and center as part of a planned re-opening. Early on in the pandemic, the Town of The Blue Mountains created a local Community (COVID) Recovery Task Force, and this group meets regularly to do what it can to assist local businesses deal with the devastating impact of the prolonged public health lockdowns. This group stands ready to help implement any provincially designed full recovery plan.

Most of our businesses are independently and locally owned and are near completely closed with most employees furloughed. Lack of liquidity is the greatest risk facing businesses at present, which threatens their ability to bounce back upon reopening. Uncertainty and an unclear roadmap to next steps makes the financial and emotional burden that each employer, employee, and local resident faces more difficult.

The Town of the Blue Mountains' small accommodation businesses have been prevented from qualifying for the Ontario Small Business Grant. This is a challenge in tourism-driven communities because accommodations are the key visitation driver. A loss of small accommodators will have a negative ripple effect across retail, restaurant, attractions, and other related sectors. Annual tourism receipts in the RT07 region equal more than \$1.3 billion dollars annually. With regional tourism sector losses somewhere between 30-50% year over year, the economic impact is dramatic.

Businesses urgently need to understand what the criteria will be for a full re-opening, with data points that are measurable, and understandable, in order to better plan and manage their businesses. They are also calling for time to prepare for reopening. Supply chains have been severely impacted by over a year of restrictions. We fully understand that some of the "exit" milestones and the timing of these may be subject to further change, but a plan is needed. More recovery business debt is not possible. Many of our local businesses will not survive if this next recovery is not well planned or managed by ALL PARTIES.

For our municipality, we are unique in that we are the “home” to over 2.5 million visitors each year, and during this “staycation” pandemic, likely many more. We need time to plan for these visitors so that their visit experience is something they will fondly recall and not regret. Like our local businesses, this planning needs to be based upon a public health restriction easing that is well laid out and not designed as we go. While we fully understand that the timing of this plan is subject to the achievement of certain public health milestones, we nevertheless need that plan.

Over 60,000 people recently gathered at a stadium in New Zealand to celebrate herd immunity as that country has reached its target vaccination goals. They were not wearing masks and looked to be enjoying themselves. Here in Canada, aside from the everchanging vaccine rollout parameters, we are told by the science experts that, on the one hand, everything will be normal once we reach our vaccination goal for herd immunity and then told that we will still have to wear masks and stick to public health distancing guidelines because we can still spread the virus, in spite of the vaccine. So, which is it? We need a clear positive statement of how we can return to normal.

Premier, we stand ready to help and I know many of our small business owners do so as well. Perhaps one way to move forward with some input from municipalities and businesses is to establish a COVID recovery advisory group that is tasked with providing government with economic and business recovery advice and planning. You have numerous “science” tables advising you on ways to combat the virus but is it not time to establish a COVID business and economic recovery task force outside of the Jobs and Recovery Committee of Cabinet to help you guide the Province out of this devastating lockdown sequence?

Premier, hopefully we have made a strong case for a clearly communicated plan for this province’s transition out of this pandemic that our residents and businesses can rely on. We want to see the light at the end of the tunnel!

Yours Truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alar Soever".

Mayor Alar Soever
Town of The Blue Mountains

Enclosed: Samples of Frontline Business Experience

CC: Community Recovery Task Force members (via email)
 Department File – C2657

SAMPLE OF FRONT LINE BUSINESS EXPERIENCE

From a Small Local Art Gallery:

"I suppose we are still in the game as a small gallery started in late fall of 2019. If Jeff and his business weren't backing it we would have probably closed up a year ago. These closures are a killer.

We start to move ahead and generate foot traffic and sales then boom! We're closed.

- we are allowed curbside sales etc but no visits by appt or reduced number.... yet the very people who are our biggest supporters aren't supposed to travel from their homes. How do you sell art online or at the curb?

- everyone followed guidelines, our space wasn't overrun etc. but here we are. Closed. I could load up my van and try and show art in the Walmart parking lot like a sleazy salesperson in a trench coat.

- what are the numbers based on? I would like more details as to those who have tested positive... I have questions but am made to feel like a trouble maker when I question what is going on.

- the idea that we can't interact outside boggles my mind. I think it is possible to plan outdoor activities where the art is shown in a safe hygienic way.

- things taped off and not sold... it's insane. It means I will buy online and it may be Amazon that gets my business instead of say Dollarama. You're robbing these stores of sales and robbing employees of an income. Their hours are being depleted and it's depriving our neighbors of an income.

- so many shortsighted laws being put in place.

- the means by which this vaccine is being rolled out. Don't get me started People who need it still not able to get it or are due for #2. We aren't supposed to travel but some are traveling way out of their district to get the vaccine?

Eventually I think some of should be allowed to venture out into the world and not be fearful of anything invisible or Afraid of a nosy neighbor or of or someone who thinks we aren't following guidelines as they interpret them.

We're all just tired.

From a Small Local Art Gallery

"As you know, I have relocated my gallery, once again, and am impatiently awaiting the opportunity to reconnect with the public. Last year was one I wish to move on from with great haste, both for the covid crisis as well as challenges at my last address.

While I understand the moving target that the crisis presents our government, it is none the less quite frustrating to not be able to plan for the year ahead with any certainty.

If we are a low risk area, which the lack of vaccines coming this way would suggest, then why are we forced to close all our businesses in the meantime? I'm concerned the lack of vaccines with mean we will be forced to remain closed after the cities have been reopened."

From a Small Local Fitness and Wellness Facility

"What I have to share is that our business has been greatly affected by covid. We removed all in-person services from our offerings like yoga & massage and with that we also moved to downsize & try and focus on what we thought were the areas we had more control within with things being so uncertain. We've had people assume we closed altogether. It literally feels like we started a new business with trying to navigate the ebbs & flows of it all. We're working hard to be based more online but we also still want to be and have mostly operated as in-person retail with our brick & mortar. It's been extremely difficult not keep people engaged with our offerings when there is so much online and we can't be face to face with people. So our hope for when things reopen is that we are able to operate as functionally and consistently as possible.

We also never heard back about the grant being offered to businesses and have relied solely on what we can pull in other than cerb which doesn't cover it. I would love to see more resources for businesses, not just on a financial level but resources for people looking for small businesses to support & ways for small businesses to advertise to more people. Essentially I would love to see the government advocate more for the little guy & want to see that flourish more than currently allowing the box stores to take over."

From a Small Locally Funded Arts and Culture Facility:

"I think the one of the biggest impacts to the community has been the inability for groups to gather and socialize, especially over the winter. Normally, gatherings would be facilitated by our facility, the local Legion and even the churches but all of us have been severely hampered by pandemic restrictions.

It is our sincere hope that, when restrictions ease, we can provide that meeting hub which will help the community heal over the coming year; not only offering a place for simple socialization but also enrichment and fitness programmes and venues for celebrations previously postponed.

The biggest hurdle for us is that, with almost no opportunity to fundraise in our normal manner, the fundamental building expenses such as insurance and utilities have drained our finances. Critical to our growth upon opening will be our ability to hire and rehire the staff we will need. This will be our largest financial challenge and we are exploring all grant options to assist.

We would love a clear roadmap of the stages of reopening but we are fully aware that uncertainty remains a factor and will do so for some time."

From a Small Local Retailer:

"I definitely am in the languishing state, don't know how to get myself motivated. Difficult to curb side, people have to look and see what we have. Online has its problems too, silly silly questions, want it for nothing etc. Our landlord wants his rent regardless, even though he knows we are not open! He just threatens to close it all down. Hopefully they do not add more time to the existing lockdown. It would have been nice to be able to let at least one person in at a time under covid rules."

From a Small Local Retailer:

"I believe that the uncertainty around vaccine effectiveness will be a barrier to people feeling comfortable to go out and shop. Unfortunately, both levels of government have been unclear on what the world will look like once we have achieved the required level of vaccinations."

I recently saw on The National a report on over 60,000 people gathered at a stadium in New Zealand to celebrate herd immunity as that country has reached its target vaccination goals. They were not wearing masks and looked to be enjoying themselves. Here in Canada, aside from the ever-changing vaccine rollout parameters, we are told on the one hand that everything will be normal once we reach our vaccination goal for herd immunity and then told that we will still have to wear masks and stick to public health distancing guidelines because we can still spread the virus in spite of the vaccine. So which is it? We need a clear positive statement of how we can return to normal."

From a Small Local Health Professional:

Unfortunately I purchased this business March 1st 2020 right before the first lockdown. We have been forced to close (now without the possibility of CERB or EI) and my assets are draining quickly. I understand there needs to be restrictions but to restrict a regulated health professional, furthermore a nurse, from her ability to practice is cutting me at my knees. I have supported local vaccine role out but would still be able to work at my clinic. I do have patients who have medical reasons to be treated but most are cosmetic. If I can keep the public safe as a nurse in other areas of practice (ie. Emergency department) I can also keep them safe in a quiet Clinic."

The government has failed in getting vaccines out to the public and now our economy has catastrophically gone further in the red."

This will take decades to recover from and it is a true shame for our children."

Please make a reopening plan and support moving forward that includes better equipped stakeholders to the table to support our small businesses."

From a Small Local Retailer:

"It's a tough to capture succinctly the impact of the pandemic as it relates to me: an entrepreneur and proud small business owner, as there are many layers to this impact. The most obvious and easiest to measure is financial. The tougher to describe are the less measurable impacts such as cultural and emotional.

On the financial front there have been programs that have assisted but even with the hours of soul sucking paperwork and applications I know I still have a huge financial hole to dig out of as we re-start. The funds received have been appreciated but they fall short on many fronts (such as the wage subsidy doesn't allow me to apply as I am not arms length yet I continue to work hard everyday during lockdown) and don't account for the impact of stress created knowing you are not in control in anyway of the risk of losing your business.

The personal emotional impact is significant, as small business owner I invested heavily personally into my startup, in addition I invested uncountable hours into bringing my business to life and making it a success, I poured my heart and soul into my business. Only to see it crushed through no fault of my own, for the third time. Enthusiasm is one of those unique characteristics of a small business owner that helps you create and recreate your business, its so hard to stay enthusiastic as we keep attempting to pivot with pardon the pivot pun to nauseating results. For our team, I have great empathy. The heartbreak of re-issuing ROE's for your team members is both a lot of paperwork and emotionally tough.

The team here at my business is a combination of employees and contractors, regardless of their status I consider the 40 plus people here part of the team, the essence of our work community. The impact of closing and the empathy for our team members is tough. On a business front the impact to how we operate equates to changes in the requirements for additional skills, new protocols to train and cultural impact. Please don't underestimate the impact that culture has on a small business. I have invested a lot into creating a great work culture, every time we close and reopen the stop and start destroys our culture, having to reboot it every time! I believe a great guest experience starts with a great team experience – the challenges of keeping a great team experience at work at the time are difficult.

Community wise we supported many local entities including other small business and charities. The ripple effect is significant!

There are several questions that I have:

Financial – how do I dig out of the hole that has been created from over 6 months of closures? (forgive the CEBA)

Talent – Will people want to work? Will I find the right talent to fuel the business and at what cost? Is there housing available for my team that they can afford (with the crazy housing market here)? How do I retain those that have gone through the last 3 stops and starts and might prefer a more guaranteed work environment (government/ banks etc)

Re-igniting enthusiasm- How do I get personally motivated, then how to I get this great culture rolling for the team again? How do I increase employee engagement? How do I incent the team to be engaged? How do I personally get the covid fatigue away?

Consumer Demand – How do I crystal ball recovery and know what is on consumer's minds?

Pivot – What do I need to change and at what cost and is now the time to invest? Do I invest or dig out of the hole created financially?"

From a Small Local Restaurant Owner and Operator: *The impact of being shut down for so many months, is massive. Rent relief and wage subsidy have been a great help, but this is just not enough, the repeated opening and closing incurs unrecoverable costs from lost perishable food items, training, etc. Rent is not covered 100%, and in the case of a restaurant we are planning to open, no rent is covered, which does not incent operators opening new businesses. Grants are very limited in their scope, in our case we can only receive 1 grant for 5 restaurants, because we are affiliates..... How is our industry going to continue to absorb these costs for another year?*

On the staffing side, the impact on their livelihoods & mental health cannot be underestimated - we have lost 10-20% of our staff on every reopen due to this."

From a Small Local Retailer:

"We are a small retail business. We do our best to hire people, invest time and money in training and developing them so they can have a career. We hire extra part time staff where they can make some extra cash while going to school and summer break.

We offer great fashion to our customers and give amazing service so they can return back to our stores. We search many suppliers to bring great quality at the best prices.

Having said that this pandemic as been incredibly challenging. In retail if you don't buy the product on time before the seasons starts, you won't be able to find units available. At the same time if we don't purchase the product, many suppliers won't make it as they also buy the product before the seasons starts and rely on customers like us to purchase similar to the year before so they can stay in business.

If all retailers become scared and don't do their purchase according to making their sales, some suppliers will go bankrupt. So we did our purchases to the max because we were ready for business. However with the last two shutdowns, mind you without any notice, has put us in a bad situation as we invested tens of thousands of dollars to just sit there in our closed locations and have NO ROI!

We believe that the Blue Mountain did not have to shut down as they did an amazing job in controlling the traffic and follow Ontario safety guidelines, if anything they did over and above the expectations. We feel as business owners we would have been fine controlling our traffic and have a safe environment, however that did not matter and we were all shut down anyways.

It did not matter what the Blue Mountain and it's stores did to control the pandemic and were labeled as a grey zone when we were one of the best in Ontario for lowest covid cases. Many stores are still open like Shoppers Drug Mart as an example, someone can buy perfume but can't buy a top from our store, what is the difference? You can go inside Starbucks and have a line up from inside to outside the door, wait 10 to 15 minutes inside for a cup of coffee, but you can't come into our store and buy a dress. There are many examples as to how unfair this has been for everyone. Many of us have lost a lot of money for no reason what so ever, while many are making more money. There was no need to close retail stores and outdoor dining, as no proof has been provided that is where you catch Covid.

This has been a very challenging time for us and it will take some time to recover our losses, like many others."