

Let's have local options

by TOM CLARIDGE

IT MADE SENSE, when the Ontario government followed others in declaring a state of emergency in the province, that it applied everywhere in the province of 14 million.

After all, no one knew how far or how quickly the COVID-19 pandemic would spread; all we really knew was that in the circumstances we should have a virtual lockdown, with all but businesses declared essential closing and residents urged to stay home or at least not be closer than two metres to anyone but family members sharing a home.

However, two months later we are in a period when all 50 U.S. states have at least partially re-opened their businesses despite a death toll from the coronavirus now approaching 100,000.

In Ontario, golf courses and many stores are free to open but thus far there has been no relaxation of an order banning groups of more than five people (even if they maintain the two-metre distancing), and now everyone is expected to wear a mask if there is a risk of encountering people who are closer than two metres.

Why? Premier Doug Ford says that's what the senior public health officials have advised, in view of the fact that with far too little testing of the populace, more than 400 new COVID-19 cases were turning up daily, as well as more than 20 deaths each day.

As we see it, the new cases and additional deaths are proof positive of the need to go slow on re-openings in provincial hot spots like Toronto, where last weekend there were an estimated 10,000 mainly young and unmasked people in the downtown Trinity Bellwoods park.

However, does it make any sense at all to apply the same rules in Grey and Bruce counties, which have had no COVID-19 deaths, or the Sudbury district, which has had only 64 cases and two deaths, none in recent weeks?

Even locally, there has been only one recent death and most of the 34 in Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph have been in long-term care facilities, headed by 19 in Shelburne Residence, where an outbreak that began on April 9 was finally declared over on Monday.

As of Tuesday, Toronto had had 771 deaths from COVID-19. while the death counts elsewhere in the Greater Toronto Area were Peel 268; York 182 and Durham 168, for a GTA total of 1,329, out of a provincial total of 2,102.

Roughly 100 years ago, North America was in the midst of a crusade, the Temperance movement, which led to a Prohibition era during which in the United States there was a nationwide constitutional ban on the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933. There was no such ban in Ontario, where alcoholic beverages continued to be produced but could be sold only in municipalities allowing it.

Under this Local Option arrangement, all municipalities in Dufferin and Grey counties opted to be 'dry' but hotels were able to sell booze in neighboring Simcoe and Bruce counties, the result being that hotels in spots like Loretto and Hepworth (20 minutes from Owen Sound) enjoyed boom times until well after the Second World War.

In our view, some form of local option would be appropriate in today's circumstances, with local public health units getting permission from the Province to stage local re-openings based on the actual status of the coronavirus locally.

To us, it makes no sense to have the same restrictions on the local economy in the GTA and parts of the province where there is no evidence of continuing community spread.

Even in Dufferin, with its 34 deaths, there have been only a handful of newly detected cases in May, and no confirmed instances of community spread.

Another advantage of having pandemic-related restrictions handled by local public health units would be that those restrictions could be increased in the event of any new outbreaks.