

North Hastings townships endorse travel advisory

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While Hastings Prince Edward Counties remained in the green/prevent zone of Ontario's COVID-19 response framework until recently, Hastings Prince Edward Public health's medical officer of health and CEO Dr. Piotr Oglaza advised all residents in a Nov. 20 press release to avoid any unnecessary travel to other regions to prevent HPE from rising infection rates. This was a move which was endorsed by Mayor Libby Clarke of Tudor and Cashel Township, Mayor Carl Stefanski of Limerick Township, Mayor Dennis Purcell of Faraday Township and Mayor Bonnie Adams of Carlow Mayo Township a few days later. With a rise in infection rates that moved HPE into the yellow/protect zone, Oglaza and the aforementioned township mayors are stressing that adhering to COVID-19 protocols and remaining within our region is now more important than ever to keep COVID-19 numbers as low as possible.

Dr. Oglaza's recommendation discouraging non-essential travel to other regions in a HPEPH Nov. 20 press release, was due to the fact that at that point there were 15 active cases in Hastings Prince Edward Counties reported over the previous week. That number subsequently went up to 17 active cases as of Nov. 23 and 19 active cases as of Nov. 26.

The mayors of Tudor and Cashel Township, Limerick Township, Faraday Township and Carlow Mayo Township were all firmly on board with Oglaza's recommendation, issuing the following uniform statement on their respective township websites and Facebook pages a few days later.

"This past Friday, our medical officer of health, Dr. Piotr Oglaza issued a statement asking all residents in our communities to avoid unnecessary travel to other regions of the province. Dr. Oglaza's request is one that my council and I fully support," they said in the postings.

Unfortunately, by Nov. 27, the Ontario government had downgraded HPE from green/prevent to yellow/protect zone in light of an increasing infection rate.

In the last seven days, 27 new cases have been reported in the region, meaning the local incidence rate has gone up to 16 per 100,000 people. The incidence rate demonstrates how quickly rates of the virus are increasing in the region. This has been an increase from 15 active cases or an 8.3 per 100,000 people incidence rate back on Nov. 20.

The more stringent measures associated with yellow/protect zone took effect on Nov. 30 at 12:01 a.m. These include limited hours of operation for certain settings, reduced program sizes for recreational activities, additional enforcement and fines and greater education in high risk locations. Oglaza emphasized that it is crucial to protect our vulnerable populations and our health care system capacity in a statement on Nov. 27.

"The level of transmission in our region has increased quickly over the past week, requiring additional preventative measures. To avoid further restrictions, I ask all residents to redouble their efforts at this critical time. Please continue to ask yourself: 'What can I do to reduce my risk of exposure and help limit the spread of COVID-19? What can I do to protect my family, friends and community?'" he says.

In addition to practicing the five fundamental actions to keep everyone protected (stay home when ill, always physical distance, wear a mask, wash your hands often and get tested if you have COVID-19 symptoms or have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19), HPEPH also reiterates their request to avoid all non-essential travel to other regions and to stay as close to

home as possible.

Oglaza acknowledges that over the past several months that HPE has made considerable sacrifices and diligently followed HPEPH advice to control the spread of the virus.

“Despite the hard work taking place at many levels, we have seen a significant increase in the number of cases of COVID-19 in our region over the past few weeks. Please don't get discouraged by these numbers, but instead consider this to be motivation to redouble your efforts to make responsible choices that protect the larger community,” he says.

All four mayors who endorsed the non-essential travel advice from HPEPH back on Nov. 20, were deeply concerned in light of this infection rate increase, and stressed that residents needed to stay diligent in their efforts to curb the spread of the virus and abstain from non-essential travel to other regions, especially those with higher infection rates.

Clarke revealed that it was not a total surprise that Hastings Prince Edward Counties moved into the yellow zone, as HPEPH had requested a meeting on Nov. 23 with its municipal partners via Zoom to discuss the implications of the rising COVID-19 numbers.

“The risk to our residents from COVID-19 is real and we all need to take individual actions to protect each other. It just makes good sense.”