

Ford government makes it easier to buy alcohol

By **Kaitlin Sylvester**

On Dec. 14 the Ontario government announced a significant change to the province's alcohol retail landscape. Premier Doug Ford unveiled plans to allow for the purchase of beer, wine, cider, coolers, seltzers, and other low-alcohol ready-to-drink beverages from convenience, grocery, and big box stores by January 2026. This change marks the most extensive expansion of consumer alcohol options since the end of prohibition in 1920. This change comes with a proposed 8,500 new retail outlets across Ontario. In an announcement to local municipalities in December Premier Ford said "we made a promise to the people of Ontario to deliver more choice and convenience. Today, we're delivering on that promise." The move claims to provide Ontarians with a shopping experience on par with other provinces, prioritizing convenience for the end consumer. Ahead of the transition, the government notified Brewers Retail Inc. (The Beer Store) that the Master Framework Agreement (MFA) would not be renewed after its expiration in December 2025. The Beer Store and LCBO plan to continue operations in the new marketplace. The Ontario government outlined a measured approach meant to ensure a smooth and stable transition. The strategy includes several initiatives including pricing, pack sizing, and a continued recycling program through The Beer Store. Ontario plans to introduce competitive pricing for private retailers, in order to develop competition and ultimately better prices for consumers. Consistent pricing across the province, including rural and northern areas, will be maintained at retail stores, with retailers having the option to set promotional prices within regulations. Additionally, restrictions on pack sizes will be removed, allowing consumers to purchase 12-packs, 24-packs, or even 30-packs of beer, cider, and ready-to-drink alcohol beverages at different retail outlets. The Beer Store will continue to run the province-wide recycling program for alcoholic beverage containers until at least 2031, ensuring convenience for consumers and environmental benefits. The government promised to provide transitional support for Ontario-based producers, including extended shelf space for craft producers in new retailers, enhanced programs, and the elimination of the 6.1 per cent wine basic tax at on-site winery retail stores. An additional \$10 million over five years will be allocated to the Ministry of Health to support social responsibility and public health efforts, maintaining existing requirements for staff training, minimum pricing, hours of sale, and warning signs. The announcement received praise from various industry stakeholders. Aaron Dobbin, President and CEO of Wine Growers Ontario, expressed his enthusiasm, saying, "today is one of the best days the Ontario wine industry has had in decades." The measures garnered support from key players in the industry, including Ontario Craft Wineries, Spirits Canada, Convenience Industry Council of Canada, and Retail Council of Canada. The government plans to engage in ongoing consultations with industry partners, local beverage alcohol producers, and stakeholders to refine aspects of the new marketplace, such as licensing, pricing, and taxes. A broader review of taxes and fees on beer, wine, and alcoholic beverages will also be conducted to enhance competitiveness for Ontario-based producers and consumers. LCBO will remain the exclusive wholesaler, ensuring a broad array of choices for consumers, maintaining purchasing power, and supporting sector stability. The Beer Store will continue its role in beer distribution until at least 2031. Ontario's decision to liberalize the alcohol retail sector is set to redefine the consumer experience. The government ensures the program will boost local economies, and support the growth of Ontario-made products. The comprehensive approach aims to balance increased consumer choice with social responsibility and industry support.