

Public participation key to slowing spread of COVID-19



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By Nate Smelle

By the time The Bancroft Times went to press on Monday, March 23 the World Health Organization had reported that the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide had surpassed 367,000. With the global death toll of the pandemic now standing at 16,381, unprecedented measures to protect the health and safety of the public are being taken by all levels of government and factions of society around the world. As of press-time on Monday there were 2,017 confirmed cases in Canada. British Columbia is one of the hardest hit provinces, recording 472 confirmed cases, and 13 deaths. Ontario now has 503 confirmed cases, and six people have died after contracting the virus. It was also announced on Monday by Hastings-Prince Edward Public Health that a third case of COVID-19 had been confirmed within the region. In response to the pandemic all seven municipalities in North Hastings have closed their municipal offices indefinitely. As the death toll and number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to rise, so is the public's awareness regarding their role in limiting the range of the pandemic. These measures have become evident in communities throughout North Hastings, with many local businesses stepping up efforts to help the public maintain exceptional hand hygiene, social distancing and cough etiquette. Both local grocery stores in Bancroft have been implementing precautionary measures to keep the public and their workers safe. Explaining the steps his employees have been taking, Foodland's owner Joe Favot said "We are all putting in an extra effort to sanitize our cash stations continually. We can't do any more than we usually do with food handling, since we already do over and above what is required. We are doing more cleaning of the shelves, and the aisles, and the counters making sure we are on top of that more frequently. As far as sanitizing goes, our employees are following health guidelines - washing their hands, not touching their face, etc." Last Thursday Foodland's parent company Sobey's also announced that it would be installing Plexiglas splash shields at every one of its cash registers to provide further protection for their workers and customers. With many residents stocking up on food and essential supplies in case the situation worsens locally and they are forced to go into self-isolation or quarantine, Favot said they have been increasing the quantity of everything in the store to keep up with the demand. While many stores in larger urban centres began noticing an increase in demand a few weeks ago, Favot said it wasn't until Thursday, March 12 that they started to see a spike in sales locally. Noting that they receive deliveries of different foods every day, he said their suppliers have been struggling to keep pace with the increased demand. "It's snowballing because they are telling people to stop hoarding, overbuying, but then a customer will come in today and see that we have no bread. Tomorrow they will come in and see that we have bread, so how can you tell them not to buy more when they know that tomorrow it is going to be empty again because people are buying more? It's just a vicious circle," said Favot. He continued "They might not be able to get something today, but it will be there tomorrow or the next day. The product is still flowing, it is just slowly flowing." No Frills manager Sam Sicker said they have also recognized a massive increase in shoppers coming through their doors. To help reduce the risk of spreading the infection, he said their staff have also been doing everything possible to sanitize the entire store. To ensure that

everyone is able to access the groceries they need, Sicker said they have also placed a limit of four on every item in the store. After describing every day as being "like an August long weekend," he added "We are getting our loads in as usual, but the way the warehouses are now everything is behind because of the big overflow. They are catching up as we go. Instead of us getting a half tractor trailer load of stuff we are getting a whole tractor trailer load of stuff." We are running on winter hours instead of summer hours, so now it is like we are in the middle of the summer here trying to keep up. They will get on track." To further reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19, No Frills has started opening the store for seniors and people with disabilities on Tuesdays and Fridays from 7 a.m. until 8 a.m. Foodland will also be opening early for seniors and people with disabilities Monday through Sunday from 7 a.m. until 8 a.m. In an effort to take pressure off the health-care system and limit the spread of the virus in Ontario, the province declared a state of emergency on Tuesday, March 17. By order of this declaration a wide-ranging list of establishments were forced to close immediately, including: All facilities providing indoor recreational programs; All public libraries; All private schools as defined in the Education Act; All licensed child care centres; All bars and restaurants, except to the extent that such facilities provide takeout food and delivery; All theatres including those offering live performances of music, dance, and other art forms, as well as cinemas that show movies; and Concert venues. In addition, all public gatherings of more than fifty people, including communal services within places of worship, parades and events are now banned until the State of Emergency is lifted. In a media release on the provincial government's website, Premier Doug Ford stated "We are facing an unprecedented time in our history. This is a decision that was not made lightly. COVID-19 constitutes a danger of major proportions. We are taking this extraordinary measure because we must offer our full support and every power possible to help our health care sector fight the spread of COVID-19. The health and well-being of every Ontarian must be our number one priority." The province also announced a series of investments in response to the crisis amounting to \$304-million. To assist with the effective treatment of COVID-19 patients both in critical care and medicine beds the government is spending \$100-million to increase the capacity of Ontario's hospitals. Another \$50-million will go towards more testing and screening through public health. To protect frontline workers, first responders and patients the government has committed \$50-million to increase the supply of personal protective equipment and other critical supplies and equipment to protect them. To further support frontline workers working in COVID-19 assessment centres, the province is spending an additional \$25-million to create a new fund that provides respite care, child care services and other supports as they are needed. Another \$50-million in funding is being provided to allow for 24/7 screening, additional staffing to support infection control and additional supplies in long-term care homes. The government has also committed to spending \$20-million for residential facilities in developmental services, gender-based services and protective care for children and youth to support additional staffing, respite for caregivers impacted by school closures, personal protective equipment and supplies and transportation costs to minimize client exposure and to support social distancing, as well as additional cleaning costs. An additional \$5-million will be spent on protecting seniors in retirement homes; and, \$4-million has been set aside for Indigenous communities to support health care professionals and the distribution of critical supplies. To further contain the spread of COVID-19, the provincial government also announced late Monday afternoon that as of 11:59 p.m. on March 24 it was ordering the mandatory closure of all non-essential workplaces. While this closure will be in effect for 14 days, there is a possibility the order might need to be extended depending on how the situation evolves. The government also indicated that a full list of businesses that are permitted to stay open was to be released on March 24.