



George and Jenny Scott, owners of Scott's Nursery in Fredericton, are pictured in this file photo. Scott's Nursery is one of many businesses in the province trying to adapt to ever-changing COVID-19 measures.

Photo: Submitted

🕒 Published 15 hours ago



Savannah Awde | Legislature Bureau

It's the news that sidelined businesses across the province have been waiting for. But one day after Premier Blaine Higgs announced that they should start preparing to reopen, many say

they are struggling to understand how to operate under the new normal of "fluid" COVID-19 restrictions.

At a news conference on Tuesday, Higgs suggested businesses should prepare for a gradual reopening by thinking about necessary distancing and protective gear in their operations.

At the same meeting, chief medical officer Dr. Jennifer Russell described a "cyclical" pattern of easing COVID-19 measures, warning that New Brunswickers "have to be prepared for releasing measures, and then imposing them again on very short notice."

"We are going to be doing a dance ... based on data and based on criteria that is being established at the national level around case counts, and the types of cases that we see in a province, and the timeframe around when we stop seeing an increase in numbers."

But businesses say that uncertainty will be a big challenge, and worry that "flip-flopping" isn't sustainable.

"We hope that it's not going to come to kind of a revolving door, because that doesn't provide sustainability or any kind of structure, and we're trying to normalize operations," Saint John Chamber CEO Dave Duplisea said on Wednesday.

"That kind of approach might be a bit scary for businesses."

Greater Moncton Chamber CEO John Wishart agreed, noting that the one thing business dreads most is uncertainty.

Jenny Scott of Scott's Nursery in Fredericton knows this reality firsthand. She says she worries about investing to modify her store and operations to comply with health measures, only to have to close it again.

"Everybody's got reduced income now, and how much money do you invest on changing everything to do it this way, and then things change and we have to do it another way, it's just so much added expense," she said.

Asked about this uncertain outlook on Wednesday, Higgs drove home the idea that businesses will have to verify that they are following health guidelines.

"When a business is looking to start up, they need to look first and foremost, are they able to follow the rules put in place because those rules will not change," he said.

"I think every business has to weigh, are they able to make those appropriate measures sustainable?"

On Higgs' road to reopening, garden centres were one of the first permitted to open again — meaning Scott's business could now go back to some version of 'normal'.

But, for now, she plans to keep the store closed.

"When you start thinking about all the little problems that would go with that, for the time being we're going to hold fast and continue with the curbside pickup."

Business leaders ask for 'very clear plan'

Wishart said that one thing is clear from discussions with Moncton business: A clear plan, including phases and details on how business must operate in each phase, is needed.

In a letter to Higgs last week, CEO of the Fredericton Chamber Krista Ross requested guidance on what industries might be able to open first, what the rules will be, and listed the key questions that businesses are seeking answers to.

"What metrics / criteria will be used to determine when businesses will be allowed to reopen? Will reopening be done on a community-by-community basis, or on an industry-by-industry basis, or some other basis? Will reopening be done in phases? Which businesses will be included in which phases?"

Higgs has yet to give details on these questions, but suggested that businesses should be brainstorming their reopening now.

"Businesses could today be thinking about, 'What could I do to practice [physical] distancing? What would I do in my operation to ensure that people can come and go safely and not have any additional risk to their employees? Would they need to wear masks? Would they need special clothing?'"

But amid the uncertainty, there are bright spots.

Chambers of Commerce leaders in Saint John, Moncton, and Edmundston all said they've observed a renewed appreciation for buying local.

"People are understanding how important it is to buy on our side, here, because we need our resources in the region," Edmundston Chamber's Cathy Pelletier said on Wednesday, noting a switch from the regional tendency to cross the nearby border for cheaper goods in the United States.

In Saint John, Duplisea is seeing the hardest-hit sectors become the most innovative in finding new ways to serve customers.

Wishart has also seen businesses in the Moncton area find models that work for them at the height of the lockdown — and he's urging them not to throw out those tips and tricks.

He added that this situation is an opportunity to "reimagine" the future for New Brunswick's economy, and revamp the way business and government operate.

"We've never seen government so responsive so quickly as we've seen in the past few months, so hopefully some of that is retained."

 Published 15 hours ago

