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COVID-19

COVID closures should be “in the hands of the business owners”: councillor



Some business organizations with membership in Saint John's uptown area said moving to the red phase in the key Christmas shopping season will be make or break for some.

Photo: Sean Mott/Telegraph-Journal

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Nathalie Sturgeon | Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN • A city councillor says mom-and-pop businesses would be devastated if the Saint John region moved to the red phase of recovery in the wake of rising COVID-19 cases.

"If people want to shut down, that should be up to them," said Coun. Blake Armstrong, a small business owner. "Leave it in the hands of the business owners. We follow the rules, the rules that are set out by the provincial government.

"We try to follow the rules. I think some of the rules are crazy."

Armstrong was responding Wednesday to Saint John Mayor Don Darling's opinion that there is growing support for moving to the red phase of recovery even for a short time.

As of Wednesday, Zone 2, which is the Saint John region, had 50 active cases, which is 53 per cent of the 94 active cases in the province.

A bar owner, Armstrong said he feels the restrictions under the orange phase of recovery are extreme and wants the government to revisit the rules around visiting restaurants to ensure small businesses, like his, are viable through the pandemic.

However, Public Health maintains it can manage the Saint John region's outbreak under the orange phase, while at the same time protecting social determinants of health.

"We're protecting education, we're protecting people's incomes, we're protecting people's mental health," said Dr. Jennifer Russell, New Brunswick's medical officer of health, at a press conference Tuesday.

Moving to the red phase is something businesses are fearful of, according to David Duplisea, chief executive officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce.

"This is a make-or-break for some of them," he said, speaking of the upcoming Christmas shopping season.

He said while he doesn't like to speak hypothetically, the closure of businesses may be a reality if the zone turns red or shoppers spend their dollars with larger online retailers instead of local ones.

Duplisea said the decision between public safety and their livelihoods does weigh on business owners.

"Shop local, shop safe," he said.

Nancy Tissington, executive director of Uptown Saint John, said while moving to the red phase would affect businesses, many are armed with knowledge many didn't have before regarding online resources, curbside pick-up and delivery.

She said the organization continues to support any businesses that decide to close and may offer services or products through another avenue.

"There have been some that have voluntarily closed and already pivoting as if we are in red, and I applaud them for doing so," she said. "They are thinking of the health and well-being of their community."

In a message Wednesday, Darling told the Telegraph-Journal that since Friday, when the province discussed the possibility of moving to red, things have changed for the better.

"That's positive, and I believe our focus should be on getting back to yellow and on vaccine delivery in early 2021," he said.

Darling spoke of the businesses that have voluntarily shut down and said many are losing revenue.

"They need our support, and each and every one of us can play a role," he said. "First, by following Public Health guidelines and secondly supporting local."