

Kawartha Lakes mayor says he will not ask cottagers to stay home during pandemic

Sarah Sobanski

Premier Doug Ford and Dr. Theresa Tam, chief public health officer of Canada, have urged cottagers to stay home during the coronavirus pandemic.

But Kawartha Lakes Mayor Andy Letham says seasonal residents have a right to come to the area if they feel it's best.

"They own property here," Letham said when asked his opinion at a press conference earlier this week.

"In my opinion, they should be able to come up here if they want, understanding that we have restrictions in place and those restrictions are going to apply to them as well.

"Seasonal residents are part of our community. I assumed they were part of our community all the time, not just when times were good."

An influx of seasonal residents could put undue stress on rural supplies and medical facilities that are already taxed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, [the premier and Dr. Tam have warned](#).

Civic leaders in other areas that have large seasonal populations, like [Rideau Lakes](#) and Bracebridge, have also asked cottagers to stay home.

Ontario's chief medical officer of health, Dr. David Williams, also strongly urged cottagers to stay put during a daily update on Tuesday. He suggested that if cottage owners need to visit their seasonal properties for insurance reasons, they should stay for the night and then leave again the next day.

Cheri Davidson, communications representative for the city, said many cottagers keep an eye on news in the area. A lot of cottagers are already tuning in to what's happening in Kawartha Lakes as it's flood season in the area.

She said she knows cottagers are picking up the local paper, tuning into local stations and monitoring public service announcements to keep them in the know.

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The Federation of Cottagers' Association is reminding its members that rural communities have reduced capacity to accommodate sudden changes in supply demands. Many people wouldn't ordinarily open the cottage until nearer to the May long weekend. The association has included sheltering-in-place information on its website.

"They'll have the same access to limited services that we have here," Letham said.

“They’re going to be in the same boat as the rest of us when they get here.”

Letham added that business owners in the area know that the seasonal increase is coming — it’s a big part of the Kawartha Lakes economy. He said he’s spoken with a local grocery store owner who is already ramping up his inventory to prepare for the nice-weather population.

“That’s not new business for us in the City of Kawartha Lakes. If they come up here a month earlier than they usually do, we’ll just make the necessary adjustments and go from there.”

Letham noted he isn’t inviting cottagers to come up and “party,” but if they have to come to their cottages to be safe he wouldn’t tell them not to. He said he understands why cottagers from the GTA might want to get away from the city to self-isolate.

“I’ve heard from a couple of families with front-line workers down in the GTA. They’re worried about exposing their families, so they’re sending their families up to the cottage — to their second home — to isolate and be safe. That kind of stuff makes a lot of sense to me.”

The mayor’s cautious invitation to seasonal residents is extended to snowbirds flying home early to their semi-permanent Canadian homes as well.

The city has reissued 2019 licences for private trailer parks across the region. That means they could open earlier than the usual May 1 date to accommodate those who usually live here during the milder months.

“It is up to the individual park owners to provide that service,” he said.

When asked if he had concerns about snowbirds returning during the COVID-19 outbreak, Letham said: “They can quarantine in a trailer park as well as they can quarantine anywhere else. Some of them, that’s their home for the summer. I don’t think there’s a whole lot of options there.”

For residents who’ve flown home and found that their seasonal home isn’t open yet, Letham said the city will help where it can.

“It’s a federal legislation that if they come back from down south they have to self-isolate for two weeks immediately. Whether they’re in a cottage or a home or in a trailer, they need to find a way to do that,” he said.

“They’re going to have to get that done and find a way to make that happen and we’ll certainly help them where we can. Hotels and motels are the first thing that comes to mind.”

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