

Listowel Banner

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Is better liquor access really worth \$600 million?

Raise your hand if you're having a harder time finding a stiff drink than a family doctor or an open emergency room in your community? How about an affordable home?

Patrick Raftis
From this angle



Which of these matters would you prefer to see your tax dollars spent on?

If inadequate liquor access is the thing that's dragging you down, cheer up, the Ontario government is here to help. The province is speeding up its planned expansion of alcohol sales.

Premier Doug Ford announced late in 2023 that sales of beer, wine, cider, and ready-to-drink cocktails would be allowed in convenience stores and all grocery stores by 2026. This past Friday the government announced the phased expansion will now start on Aug. 1 of this year, with licensed grocery stores that currently sell beer, cider, and wine able to sell ready-to-drink cocktails and offer beer in larger packages (generally now restricted to six packs). Further expansion is set to follow quickly.

This all comes with a price of \$225 million in public money to be paid to the Beer Store for waiving some of its monopoly rights on large pack sales earlier than planned. In addition, reporting in the *Toronto Star* indicates the tax dollar tab could climb as high as \$600 million as some fees the Beer Store currently pays to the LCBO will be rebated.

These days, when speaking of government spending on a wider scale, any amount less than a billion is talked about as if it's small change, but ponder for a minute about how one might spend that money differently, say on health care.

Just thinking locally, the Palmerston Hospital Foundation is currently conducting a fundraising campaign to raise \$8 million for the installation of an MRI machine to service this entire region, while the Wingham and District Hospital is nearing the end of a campaign to raise \$2.5 million to install a CT

scanner there. At that rate the province could install 75 MRI machines without the necessity of years long fundraising campaigns, or a whopping 240 CT scanners. Pretty sure we don't need that many of either, but some if it could be put to funding nurse practitioner positions to take the heat off physicians in underserved communities or filling any number of other needs that honestly seem more urgent than quicker liquor access.

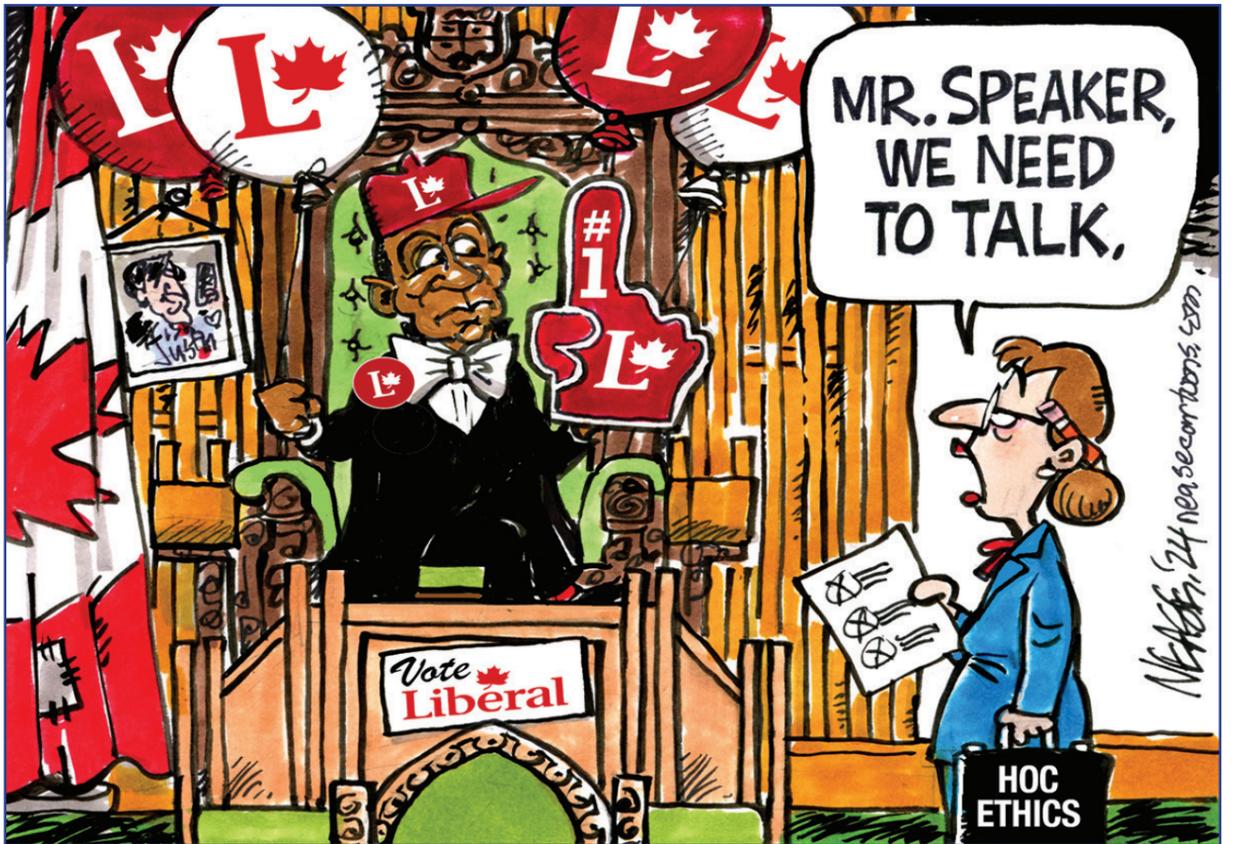
It's not even that we're opposed to the idea of updating Ontario's antiquated liquor distribution system. It's just it's hard to see how it became such a pricey priority.

I enjoy a pint myself and spend time with many of like mind, but I can't recall a single conversation with someone who felt compelled to complain about the difficulty of finding a few cold ones when needed. Most LCBO and Beer Store outlets offer extended hours, many even Sundays and many smaller communities off the beaten track already have convenience stores licensed to sell booze.

This seems like another case of the Ford government solving a problem that doesn't exist, in hopes of distracting the public from its ongoing failure on other, far more serious, files.

It's certainly reminiscent of the costly (to government coffers) move to eliminate vehicle license renewal fees in a clear effort to curry favour with voters. How many road infrastructure projects could the province have funded with the \$1 billion in annual license fee revenue they gave up? The mind boggles.

Patrick Raftis is the editor at Midwestern Newspapers. He can be reached at editor@midwesternnewspapers.com.



This country's 'herd immunity' to measles at risk

Pauline Kerr
Off The Record



When a child dies of measles, it is a tragedy. When it happens in a country with readily available, free, effective vaccine, it is even more tragic.

The death of a child under age five in Hamilton was as predictable as it was sad. With the growing number of unvaccinated people contracting measles in this country, a fatality was inevitable.

Measles is, and always was a vicious killer – one with which we, in this country, have been able to ignore for decades. The World Health Organization states that prior to the introduction of the measles vaccine in 1963, major measles epidemics happened every two to three years and caused an estimated 2.6 million deaths per year. The disease is highly contagious and spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It causes a high fever, cough, runny nose and a rash all over the body.

There is more to measles than spots, and getting to eat Jello and ice cream for a few days. Complications can include blindness, encephalitis, severe diarrhea, ear infections, and severe breathing problems including pneumonia. When a pregnant woman contracts measles, the baby could be born prematurely with a low birth weight. Complications are most common in children under five, and adults over 30, as well as those with a weakened immune system.

People in North America may be under the mistaken impression that measles is a disease of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth. It continues to be common in many parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia – mainly where there is dam-

aged health infrastructure and poverty.

So, why are Canadian children becoming ill and dying from the disease?

We can thank another highly transmissible disease – COVID-19. The pandemic did two things. The first is it meant lockdowns that disrupted normal vaccination schedules. Children normally receive two doses of vaccine, usually at around a year and 18 months old. Some missed one or both doses and have not caught up.

There is a certain irony in the fact that even as an intense and effective vaccination campaign was unleashed against COVID, other vaccination programs were seriously disrupted.

The second was the anti-vax movement. For a variety of reasons including political and religious, but certainly not scientific or medical, some people decided it was their right not to be vaccinated – not just against COVID but against everything. COVID-related vaccination issues, combined with the small percentage of people who are either too young, or otherwise unable to be vaccinated, created a pool of people with no immunity to measles in this country. Measles is so contagious, a very high rate of vaccination – 95 per cent or more, of two doses, according to Centres for Disease Control

and Prevention – is needed to create "herd immunity." In 2022, about 83 per cent of the world's children received at least one dose of vaccine by their first birthday. According to WHO, that is the lowest rate since 2008.

The numbers say it all – the measles immunity we have enjoyed in this country for decades is at risk, as are all unvaccinated children. Older folk probably have immunity, either by being vaccinated or from having had measles.

When people take their COVID-related anti-vax stance and apply it to other vaccines, they need to consider more than their personal right to get their medical advice from someone's aunt's hairdresser's psychic, via Dr. Google. They can gargle with aquarium cleaner if they want, but they need to acknowledge the right of little kids to be safe from diseases that kill.

We need to deal with facts. Fact number one – Canada has an effective, safe way to protect people from one of the diseases that has plagued the human race for centuries, killing and maiming too many children. Fact two – we need to "use it or lose it." The way to restore the herd immunity that has protected our young babies and vulnerable people for decades is to make sure everyone has their recommended vaccinations – the sooner, the better.

Pauline Kerr is a Local Journalism Initiative Reporter with Midwestern Newspapers. She can be reached at pkerr@midwesternnewspapers.com.

TURNBACKS

Ten Years Ago

2014 – Marijuana enforcement is a high priority for local OPP, as medical marijuana operations and prescriptions are on the rise and concerns about how the drug will impact operations.

Phase three of an Atwood subdivision on Fisher Avenue was put on hold for a month following concerns expressed by residents at a public meeting.

Twenty Years Ago

2004 – Over 100 veterans attended the dedications of the new Korean War monument at the Listowel cenotaph.

The entire Victoria Day weekend in Southwestern Ontario was filled with thunderstorms, torrential downpours

and even tornadoes.

Tonja Bowman and Kyle Kuepfer of LDSS won gold in pole vaulting at WOSSA.

Thirty Years Ago

1994 – Bob Smith, who joined Ideal Supply the day after he graduated from high school, retired after 40 years. Avon Lighting moved from Hwy 23 north to downtown Listowel.

Forty Years Ago

1984 – Legion members built a gazebo and brick path in the Cenotaph Park, as well as planting new trees, shrubs, and flowers – all in time for the branch's 50th anniversary.

Chris Fleming, 15, and Chantele Zehr, 13, won bicycles in the Optimist Bike Rodeo.

Fifty Years Ago

1974 – A wet, cold spring meant that farmers still didn't have many crops planted.

Fire sirens howled through town all night to warn residents and businesses that the Maitland River was in danger of flooding downtown.

Due to high water levels, Conestogo Dam had to open its gates, resulting in flooding down river in Bridgeport and Cambridge.

Sixty Years Ago

1964 – Jackson Motors, the community's oldest automotive firm, was sold to two long-time employees.

Richard Smith and Al Power of Listowel and their pilot from Detroit were unhurt when their Cessna crashed just after takeoff from the farm of Malcolm Smith. It burst into flames shortly after they got out.

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