

Most construction projects can continue — but some must shutter operations due to new lockdown restrictions in Ontario



By Josh Rubin
Tue., Jan. 12, 2021

The construction industry is breathing a sigh of relief after emerging largely unaffected in the latest round of [COVID-related restrictions](#) from the Ontario government. But some medical experts say that might have been a mistake, given the dire COVID case projections announced Tuesday.

While rumours swirled that Premier [Doug Ford](#) and his cabinet had considered shutting down much of the \$58-billion industry to help slow the rise in case counts, in the end, the majority of major projects can still continue.

However, there are exceptions: Construction projects involving office towers without any residential or retail component, strip malls, and residential construction jobs which hadn't already started by Tuesday will all have to temporarily shut down operations.

“Absolutely, they could have come down a lot harder. I don't think they should have, but they could have,” said Ian Cunningham, president of the Council of Ontario Construction Associations.

“Of course it was on the table. Everything was on the table,” Richard Lyall, president of RESCON, the residential construction industry's main provincial trade association, said of an industry shutdown.

Cunningham pointed to statistics showing that less than one per cent of successful COVID-related Workplace Safety and Insurance Board claims since the pandemic began have involved the construction industry. Of more than 10,000 COVID-related WSIB claims, 93 have been in construction, 11 of those in residential construction.

“The construction industry has done a remarkable job. There are 516,000 construction workers going to work almost every day. I think those numbers show we’re doing a good job when it comes to COVID,” said Cunningham, adding that the construction industry is essential.

“Our members do work that keeps everything from hospitals to power plants and sewers functioning,” Cunningham said.

Infectious disease specialist Dr. Isaac Bogoch said every single non-essential industry that can be shut down should be shut down, as the province deals with a surge in cases that he says is stretching the medical system to the breaking point.

“The whole point of this state of emergency is to reduce the amount of person-to-person contact, whether that’s taking place at work, at home, or anywhere else,” said Bogoch. “The more contact there is, the more transmission there will be.”

Bogoch said it was still unclear to him after reading the new guidelines for the construction industry just how much of a difference there will be.

“If it significantly reduces the amount of contact there is in the industry, it will help slow the spread. If it doesn’t, it won’t. At the moment, it’s hard to tell,” said Bogoch, who works for the University Health Network.

While he argued it’s worth shutting down some industries to avert more strain on the medical system, Bogoch acknowledged that there are consequences to severe lockdowns: “Look, there are economic consequences and mental-health consequences to lockdowns. But our medical system is being overwhelmed.”

Bogoch says the provincial government could take another step that would reduce the spread of COVID even quicker than shutting down industries — introducing paid sick leave for every single worker in the province, no matter what job they do.

“Unless they deal with the upstream causes of why people get infected, the rates will keep growing. We need more social supports like paid sick leave,” said Bogoch.