

2019 Ontario Budget Proposed Alcohol Changes: Public Health Considerations

TO: Municipalities of Grey and Bruce Counties

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KEY POINTS

- The 2019 Ontario Budget has proposed to improve choice and convenience for alcohol consumers by allowing municipalities to permit drinking in public spaces, extend the hours of alcohol sales and expand the sale of alcohol to corner stores.¹ These changes are likely to come at the expense of public health and safety in our communities.
- Alcohol is the most commonly consumed drug in Canada and Grey Bruce, and is a major risk factor for chronic disease, death and disability, as well as increased risk of injury and social problems. In Grey Bruce alone, almost 25% of residents engage in high-risk drinking, putting them at an increased risk of alcohol-related health issues.^{2,3}
- Alcohol policies can help reduce the risks and harms of alcohol and protect vulnerable populations and youth from alcohol-related harms. The Grey Bruce Health Unit can support municipalities to develop and implement policies in response to the alcohol reform plan to reduce alcohol-related harms in their communities.

DISCUSSION

The 2019 budget from the Ontario government outlines a clear commitment to improving consumer choice and convenience by substantially expanding access to alcohol. This includes a plan to permit municipalities to designate public spaces for the consumption of alcohol, extend retail hours and increase availability in convenience stores. While delivering on this promise, the government expresses their commitment to putting people first and prioritizing the **safe** and **responsible** sale and consumption of alcohol. What is missing from these proposed changes, however, is an acknowledgement that this increased choice and convenience is likely to come at the expense of public health and safety.

While the majority of adults in Ontario drink within Canada's low-risk guidelines, Grey Bruce residents are more likely to regularly drink alcohol in excess of these limits, with over 30% of the population exceeding the guidelines compared to the Ontario rate of 20.7%.⁴ Alcohol use is a major risk factor for chronic disease including some cancers, and also contributes to injuries and social problems in communities. Limiting access to alcohol is an important tool to protect the health and safety of Grey Bruce residents and to manage risk and liability for municipalities. The

Grey Bruce Health Unit is committed to continue to ensure the health and safety of our communities in light of these proposed changes, and we want to take this opportunity to outline relevant alcohol-related costs so that municipal decision-makers can make evidence-informed decisions regarding the Government's alcohol reform plan.

FINANCIAL COSTS TO MUNICIPALITIES

- The economic cost of alcohol-related harm in Ontario is \$5.34 billion per year due to lost productivity, healthcare, and criminal justice. This exceeds the cost of tobacco, cannabis, and opioid-related harms.⁵
- At the municipal level, economic costs manifest in the form of clean up and property damage, as well as policing efforts for nuisance issues (e.g., noise), drinking and driving, and crime and violence.
- Addressing and responding to the harms caused by alcohol use significantly impacts police, EMS and fire services, the healthcare system and public health. Municipalities often bear these additional costs.
- Municipalities could face increased risk and liability issues if drinking were permitted in public spaces, given that the proposed change will nullify the section of the *Liquor License Act* that bans the consumption of alcohol in public, but will not alter the section that bans public intoxication.⁶

HEALTH AND SOCIAL COSTS TO GREY BRUCE RESIDENTS

- Harmful alcohol consumption is an issue that impacts Grey Bruce residents across the lifespan (i.e. underage drinking, drinking and driving) and would likely worsen if drinking were permitted in public spaces.
- Alcohol has considerable social, cultural, and economic significance in Grey Bruce and is the most common drug consumed by residents. The proposed changes will challenge longstanding efforts to promote responsible drinking and are unlikely to improve public health and community safety or address the rising economic cost of alcohol use.
- Safety is essential to the enjoyment of the public spaces that Grey Bruce has to offer. If drinking were permitted in these spaces, this would likely significantly increase risks to public safety (e.g., public spaces with open waters, dangerous geological features, or those close to major roadways).

NEXT STEPS

Although we are awaiting more details on the recent announcements that the Ontario Government has made, it is clear in its intentions to modernize the province's alcohol regulations. The relaxation and modernization of alcohol policies in Ontario is creating an environment that normalizes and encourages consumption through increased access and promotion. The Grey Bruce Health Unit welcomes the opportunity to act as a resource for municipalities to field questions and concerns about the public health impacts of the alcohol reform plan. We want to maintain an open dialogue and collaborate with municipalities during this time of significant change to ensure that the health and safety of Grey Bruce communities remains the highest priority.

REFERENCES

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