



Your Voice on the Bay

GBA President's Letter

COVID-19 and Access to Seasonal Residences: A time to be supportive and patient

Dear Presidents of GBA Member Associations,

As I write this in mid-April, we know that stringent provincial measures to control COVID-19 will continue until at least mid-May if not longer, and social distancing and other restrictions will clearly continue after that. Many Georgian Bay cottagers are anxious about what that means for getting to our cottages.

The GBA Board of Directors discussed the issue of access to cottages at this difficult time and approved sending this message. We intend to distribute it more broadly through the *eUpdate* newsletter and GBA's website. We ask that you share it with your boards of directors, and you may wish to send it in whole or in part to your members. Many GBA member associations have already issued notices on provincial and local restrictions and the impact on their facilities (if any), programs and services.

We have all heard the pleas from heads of all our municipalities in the Georgian Bay region not to travel to the area to avoid contributing to community spread of the virus and putting even greater pressure on limited health care resources and household supplies in the region. The potential for a sudden increase in numbers of residents in the area to overwhelm scarce health care services and supply chains is a real risk currently. Marinas and other business owners are also asking cottagers to stay home at this time. Spreading the virus in cottage country could lead to further closures and restrictions. We also hear and understand decisions by local First Nations to strictly limit access to their lands at this time.

We are also hearing some complaints from individuals about restrictions on access to cottage country and closure of marinas to seasonal residents. Marina closures obviously have a direct impact on water-based cottagers, and some are frustrated that it is easier to get to properties with road access. We empathize with these concerns, but GBA advises that now is not the time to voice complaints about access and demand it be opened up. Rather, travel to cottages should be avoided. Not being able to access cottages before we even get to the prime cottaging season is not much of a hardship when terrible hardships are being felt by millions across this province and country – indeed, globally.

We are still in the midst of this crisis, with federal, provincial and municipal leaders struggling to manage the pandemic and its economic fallout. Hospitals, doctors and other health care workers are under huge pressure and going beyond the call of duty to try to ensure that everyone who needs help gets it. The numbers in Ontario still indicate a high level of risk of community spread. So for now, we need to be supportive of the authorities and our local municipal leaders in their efforts to contain and address the threat. We need to be patient until we flatten the curve and the risk level of community spread declines sufficiently to change guidelines on travel within Ontario.

The time will come to address the issue of access, and when it does GBA will do that by starting discussions with our municipal leaders. We will advocate to the Province, if needed. We need to make the case that our seasonal residents are not simply visitors or tourists. We are citizens in these communities, property owners and taxpayers. Many of us are more involved in our Georgian Bay communities and their municipal issues than we are in the cities and towns where our main residence is located. And local businesses need us. I believe they will welcome us back when the time is right, and they are ready for the seasonal rush, but not before that.

When the province and public health authorities decide that re-opening of low risk activities can occur, accessing cottages should be considered a low risk activity. It will then be everyone's responsibility to follow through by ensuring it is low risk. That means continuing to follow provincial and local social distancing rules at their marinas, local businesses and seasonal residence. Local guidelines on seasonal activities will likely need to be developed. It will not be “business as usual”. We will need to follow the rules that will be set by each marina, store and business based on their circumstances. We must respect the needs and requirements of local First Nations communities.

In this unprecedented time of crisis, our municipal officials and GBA member associations need to be community leaders and provide unified messages to both seasonal and permanent residents in our communities. Divisive comments are not helpful; this is a time to be mutually supportive and patient. When the time is right, we need to work together with municipalities and local businesses to develop workable solutions to the access issue so using seasonal residences will be safe for all concerned, especially the local communities.

We also acknowledge that our American members cannot access their cottages due to the restrictions on cross-border travel. When partial re-opening occurs, it is hoped that those restrictions will be eased as well.

GBA will continue to communicate with you on this issue and other COVID-19 news that impacts seasonal residents and our areas. Let's hope that soon enough, a degree of normality will resume and we'll be back on the Bay. Until then, please keep well, stay safe and do everything possible to limit the risk so that hopefully we can enjoy a safe summer on the Bay.

John Carson

President

Georgian Bay Association

johnwcarson@sympatico.ca

