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Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Small and Medium Enterprises Sector COVID-19 Impact Hearings

Written Submission

Submitted by:

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Introduction

The members of our informal coalition represent a dedicated group of owners and proprietors of bowling centres, entertainment centres and other facilities, many of whom have been associated with bowling for over 30 years; the Canadian representative and distributor of Brunswick Bowling and Billiards, the world's largest bowling manufacturer;

and Bowl Canada, a non- profit organization comprised of member bowling centre operators across Canada, which promote the benefits of the sport and recreation of bowling to the general public, including by providing support for organized (League) bowling. This submission has been authored by Michael Orfus who has consulted members from Bowl Canada, Striker Bowling Solutions and Splitsville Entertainment.

We would like to acknowledge the guidance and support the government has provided in steering Ontario through the COVID-19 pandemic. We applaud and appreciate the province's approach to getting Ontario back on its feet, and its obvious concern to do so in the safest way possible for our communities. The government has demonstrated tremendous leadership and we see Ontario working towards the right path to fully reopen the economy.

That being said, bowling centres and related entertainment centres, such as ice rinks and laser tag facilities, have not yet been allowed to open in any viable way. While we were pleased to see bowling centres included as part of the reopening plan for Stage 3, the rigid 50 person per facility limit has meant there has been very little if any practical benefit. The small number of bowlers allowed to be in a centre at one time costs more to service than they can ever generate in revenue.

Of course, we believe that safety is the first priority. We are not asking for any measures that would put our customers or staff in jeopardy. But common sense and experience in other business sectors and jurisdictions demonstrate that many more customers can be allowed to return and enjoy their sport and social pastime in a very safe environment.

Bowling and related entertainment centres

There are almost 200 bowling centres across the province and 500 nationally. They range from a few lanes that provide critically important recreation in a small community, to 100,000-square-foot facilities in major urban areas with co-located food centres, laser tag, arcade games or other entertainment options.

Across Canada (pre-COVID) over 700,000 Canadians visited bowling centres nationwide each week. We have programs for youth, seniors, physically and mentally challenged, and we are a hub of every community across the province and country.

It is impossible to overstate the fundamental importance of bowling centres as recreational and social lynchpins. They are popular venues for leagues, parties, family outings, community events and daily recreation in every part of the province, in cities and towns, large, medium, and small, from Toronto to Thunder Bay to Tillsonburg. They are part of the social heart of even smaller communities in both southern and northern Ontario, such as Zurich, Red Rock, Sturgeon Falls, Elmvale, Haileybury, Hastings and many more.

A large centre may employ 50 to 75 people. With both direct and indirect jobs, the sector creates well over 10,000 jobs in Ontario and tens of millions of dollars in tax revenues to all three levels of government.

We are aware of five Ontario bowling centres that have already closed permanently as a result of the COVID-related shutdown. If reasonable measures are not allowed for centres to increase customer capacity while meeting all health and safety requirements, the economic social and recreational impacts will be devastating.

A Safe Relaunch Strategy

While bowling centres were physically closed, our industry stepped up and developed guidelines and reopening materials to enable all facilities to open in a well-informed way, with a clear concern and focus placed on the public's well-being. That has been our top priority and continues to be.

Our industry nationally has developed guidelines and reopening materials, which we have made available to all bowling centre operators. This includes a "Best Practices Guide; Operational Considerations Under the COVID-19 Pandemic". Additionally, the Best Practices document was developed by a National Relaunch Committee that has been active for months now and has made several additional resources available to our members, including distancing posters, directional floor decals, etc. These resources are available for viewing on the Bowl Canada website at <https://bowlcanada.ca/covid19/>.

Bowling centres opened with provincial approval in Manitoba, British Columbia and Alberta. In each case, the decision to re-open was based on the strength and stringent guidelines set out in Bowl Canada's Best Practices document, as detailed above.

Bowling was also recently declared the safest indoor sporting activity by Michigan Public Health experts, who consider bowling as safe as backyard barbecues (see the report on [MLIVE](#)).

Here are some key indicators of how we will be successful vs. other industries based on the collective experience and information pooling that has taken place (Refer to Appendix for website links):

- Bowling services all genres from ages 3-93 with any disabilities, and can be offered as a sport, recreation, and entertainment.
- Bowling centres are found in every small town and urban area throughout the province and provide an environment that can be completely controlled for social distancing.
- The main contact point for customers is at a front desk area, marked for distancing, and once guests are in their seating area, they do not integrate with other participants.
- Many centres offer advance reservations for bowling lanes and associated amenities. Customers can be pay in advance of coming to the centre and can have a completely “contactless” shopping experience.
- Moving to a 50% capacity rate, centres will need to shut down every second lane. This gives a 12’ distance between guest groups, twice that of the recommended 6’ in other businesses.
- We have been sterilizing our equipment since the birth of the game for over 100 years. This has not changed and has been increased to comply with and exceed all health guidelines and provide peace of mind to our guests.

COVID-19 Impact and Stage 3 Restrictions

We would like to provide this Committee with a deeper understanding of how the pandemic continues to negatively impact bowling centres and the communities it serves across the province. In March, with the mandated closures, we have had numerous calls,

round tables, association meetings, and planning sessions to devise sound strategies to allow our businesses to open in a safe and controlled manner. Until Stage 3, Ontario was the only province left in Canada not allowing bowling centres to reopen.

While we are pleased to reopen under Stage 3, bowling centres across Ontario continue to face major difficulties. Our buildings are big and are not normal retail offerings. In some cases, even the size prohibits the CECRA offering from taking effect. Our tax base on these large buildings has not changed, creating a burden for operators to work expenses out with landlords and banks. The 50-person gathering limit is severely impacting our businesses from a financial standpoint and placing the future of bowling centres at risk. To remain economically viable and survive, bowling centres need tailored COVID-19 capacity restrictions.

Since opening on August 7, 2020, the revenues of Playtime Bowl & Entertainment are down 70% compared to the prior year. This revenue decline is expected to remain or even steepen should Playtime Bowl & Entertainment not be permitted to increase its capacity in the fall as it enters the prime bowling season. Most bowling leagues, including senior's leagues have in excess of 50 players. Should Playtime not be able to increase its revenues in a meaningful way it will have difficulty in bringing back all of its full time and part time team members to work. At just this one centre this could negatively impact over 30 employees.

With the fall and winter months ahead of us, families and community members look to bowling centres as an important recreational, sport and entertainment activity option

across the province. Bowling centres typically see double or triple the traffic in September to April compare to May-August.

Bowling centres are important avenues for families and community members to safely come together whether it is for birthday parties or events. Many bowling centres also host fundraising events that benefit local charities and community organizations. Bowling centres in the GTA and across Ontario have worked together to host charity events within the last year for the Canadian Cancer Society, The Ronald McDonald House in association with McDonald's Canada, Wounded Warriors Canada, The Movember Foundation in support of male prostate cancer among many other events. These events have gone on to raise in excess of hundreds of thousands of dollars for their causes.

Recommendations

We strongly encourage the government to amend the gathering restrictions for bowling centres and implement a practical capacity limit that recognizes that a 50-person cap, regardless of facility size and ability to separate bowlers and maintain safe distancing is unreasonable.

The flexibility shown by the Ontario government with fitness centres, movie theatres and professional meeting and event spaces is a positive step towards strengthening our economy as we reopen. Bowling centres should receive the same flexibility so they can remain economically viable and support local economies and communities across Ontario.

The industry is ready and committed to work collaboratively with the government on a solution to safely increase capacity so centres can continue to operate while keeping people safe.

As we have seen in some of the outdoor openings and what the tough regiments in social distancing have achieved, we are confident that our buildings are ideally suited to accommodate and maintain mandated capacity controls. While other retail outlets have customers walking up and down aisles, passing each other and sharing space, that would not happen within the bowling centre environment.

Recommendation 1: The capacity limit for bowling centres and related entertainment centres should be amended to the greater of 30% of approved capacity or one customer per 107 square feet of the facility. This would be implemented in tandem with existing public health requirements for separate entrances and exits for customers, temperature taking on entrance, directed one-way internal pedestrian flow and other standard compliance practices.

Moving to 30% of capacity is still very conservative. It is the same as, for example, religious gatherings, where people are generally spaced much more closely together than in big box entertainment centres and need to move between narrow pews. Across most of the country, bowling centres are allowed to operate at 50% of capacity and these facilities have operated safely and without incident.

Recommendation 2: Public Health officials should review the experience with increased capacity at bowling and related entertainment centres over the initial six weeks. If incidents of COVID-19 are minimal, as we expect given

the size of the spaces and safety precautions, consideration should be made to increasing the limit to 50 percent of normal capacity.

Conclusion

Thank you to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for this opportunity to present the perspectives and challenges our sector is facing because of COVID-19. We believe these recommendations are critical to providing bowling centres across Ontario with an economically viable future upon which they can continue to provide valuable services for their local communities through the COVID-19 ongoing emergency and far beyond. This also adds to the Government's vision of a province where every community is open for business and small businesses continue to succeed.

CORONAVIRUS RISK LEVEL BY ACTIVITY

9	• BARS • LARGE MUSIC CONCERTS
8	• BUFFETS • SPORTS STADIUMS • GYMS • AMUSEMENT PARKS • CHURCHES
7	• BASKETBALL • PUBLIC POOLS • SCHOOLS
6	• CASINOS • RESTAURANTS, INDOOR SEATING • PLAYGROUNDS • HAIR SALONS, BARBERSHOPS • PONTOON BOAT RIDES • MOVIE THEATERS
5	• DINNER PARTIES AT A HOUSE • AIRPLANES • BACKYARD BARBECUES • MALLS • BEACHES • BOWLING
4	• DENTIST'S OFFICE • WALKING IN A BUSY DOWNTOWN • OFFICES • DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOMS • EATING OUTSIDE AT A RESTAURANT
3	• GETTING GROCERIES • CAMPING • HOTELS • GOLFING • LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS
2	• GOING FOR A WALK, RUN OR BIKE RIDE WITH OTHERS • GETTING FUEL
1	• GETTING TAKEOUT FROM A RESTAURANT • PLAYING TENNIS

SOURCE: MLIVE
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

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Reference List and Appendix

[Striker Bowling Covid-19 Industry Resources](#)

[Brunswick Bowling Covid-19 Industry Resources](#)

[Bowling Proprietors Association of America Covid-19 Resources](#)

[Classic Bowl Facebook video](#)

[Bowl Canada Covid-19 Industry Resources](#)