

## **MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA**

### **NWT Chamber of Commerce blasts premier for ‘unacceptable’ non-response on commercial rent evictions**

**By: Simon Whitehouse**

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Link: <https://nnsl.com/yellowknifer/nwt-chamber-of-commerce-blasts-premier-for-unacceptable-non-response-on-commercial-rent-evictions/>

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The NWT Chamber of Commerce is taking aim at Premier Caroline Cochrane, on the morning of its annual general meeting, expressing “extreme” disappointment with a lack of response to its plea for relief for territory businesses that can’t make rent due to the Covid-19 pandemic that is decimating the private sector.

A sternly-worded letter obtained by NNSL Media, signed by chamber president Jenni Bruce and executive director Renee Comeau, questions why the premier has failed to respond to an earlier letter sent May 1. The May 1 letter urges the premier to place a temporary moratorium on evictions for businesses who can’t pay their rent.

“We are extremely disappointed that to date we have not even had an acknowledgment of receipt of this letter from your office,” the latest letter, sent Thursday morning, reads.

“When a follow-up phone call was placed earlier this week, we were told it had been sent to the Ministry of Justice to review. This lack of action or commentary by the GNWT has spoken volumes to the business community in the NWT.”

Bruce told NNL Media on Wednesday night that time is ticking away for landlords and tenants trying to find a solution but there has been no feedback from the GNWT.

“We’ve received no confirmation or response from the Premier’s office, addressing the letter and we’re now at the sixth of May,” Bruce said. “Our concern is that we respect commercial landlords have costs as well, but that there’s nothing coming out – there’s no money coming fast enough to help with this.”

The federal government announced the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA) on April 29 to provide some relief for commercial property owners and tenants having to pay rent. The program seeks to reduce commercial rent by 75 per cent for businesses that qualify. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) is to administer the program and provinces and territorial governments are providing up to 25 per cent of the costs.

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NNSL Media sent a request for comment to the original chamber letter to the GNWT Press Secretary's office on May 1 but hadn't received a 'reply as of Wednesday night.

Some Yellowknife MLAs expressed their support for the idea.

Rylund Johnson, MLA for Yellowknife North, stated in an email that the government has asked businesses to close due to public health concerns around Covid-19. It is only fair that the GNWT is obligated to provide predictability and certainty on when they can operate again.

He supports a two-week a pause on commercial evictions as CECRA funds are implemented, he stated.

"I don't believe anyone is asking for a moratorium on rent, the rent would still be due, the eviction just could not take place for two weeks," he stated. "This makes sense to me to let the federal money flow through."

Johnson added that after speaking to commercial landlords and commercial tenants, he believes fixed costs to operations will pose the biggest challenges for business.

"There are many long-time businesses who with support will come out the other side of this ready to reopen and continue on," he stated. "Yet absent that support, many otherwise strong businesses simply won't make it. A policy where we don't require commercial rent doesn't really make sense. It would just pass the buck up to our local landlords."

Johnson says the GNWT has a role to play to provide additional support – including government funding- to prevent the closure of businesses across the territory and ensure tenants and landlords can reach agreements.

"To date, the landlords I have spoken with are being understanding and working with their tenants," he stated. "I think they know it will be just as difficult to replace tenants during this time. However, a two-week pause on evictions allows everyone some breathing room to access federal funding."

Johnson stated that it is important that businesses take some responsibility and examine their business plans to help decide their futures. Depending on their practices and situations, it may mean having to break leases, while in other cases it may mean taking out short-term loans to make revenue.

But the GNWT must soon give all businesses "a clear date" of when they can open again.

“I honestly can’t give my constituent businesses such as a gym or restaurant a date when they will be able to reopen, whether it be this summer, fall or next calendar year,” he stated. “This lack of detail to date doesn’t allow them enough stability to create a business plan and decide whether deferring rent – which is just taking on debt through your landlord – is the best choice.”

Julie Green, MLA for Yellowknife Centre, said in a brief statement that she also is behind the idea of a commercial eviction moratorium.

“I agree with a stay on evictions for the month until the implementation of the commercial rent program. This is reasonable to ask to preserve the businesses we have.”