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Inflation, Interest Rates to Constrict Growth in Canadian Cities in 2023

OTTAWA. (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) – Canadian cities will see slow growth throughout 2023 as higher borrowing costs and inflation continue impacting local economies, according to new research from The Conference Board of Canada.

"Major cities across Canada have largely recovered from the impacts of the pandemic, but new challenges are on the horizon," said Jane Melnyk, Principal Economist at The Conference Board of Canada.

"Reduced consumer confidence across most of the country, inflation and constricted labour markets will hamper growth in most cities."

"High interest rates are starting to cool local housing demand, and the national economy's slowing will trim Calgary's forecasted GDP growth in 2023 to 2.4 per cent but will increase to 2.8 per cent in 2024."

"Despite the city's existing housing market being in full retreat, Edmonton is still seeing an influx of prospective home buyers from British Columbia and Ontario. GDP growth for the city is forecast to reach 1.8 per cent in 2023."

"With global demand increasing for many of Saskatchewan's resources, Saskatoon is set to benefit from this spillover. GDP is forecast to advance by 1.2 per cent in 2023."

"The CentrePort Canada Rail Park is currently under construction and represents a large-scale investment project that will boost some of Winnipeg's key sectors including transportation and warehousing. Real GDP is expected to rise by 0.9 per cent in 2023 and 2.4 per cent in 2024."

"Stronger commodity prices are boosting Saskatchewan's economy, and the benefits are flowing into Regina, its provincial capital. However, hampered by the national and international backdrop, GDP is forecast to grow just 0.8 per cent in 2023 before increasing a further 2.4 per cent in 2024."

"Output in services such as restaurants, hospitality, and recreation will be growth leaders in 2023 in Hamilton. However, slowing demand nationally will impact the region which will see growth of just 0.8 per cent in 2023 before increasing 2.7 per cent in 2024."

"Ottawa-Gatineau's population gains look favourable, which will keep the region's residential construction in good shape in 2023. GDP for the city is forecast to be sluggish this year, growing just 0.8 per cent before expanding a further 2.0 per cent in 2024."

"Net interprovincial and intercity migration will benefit Victoria's population numbers in the coming years, but inflation's weight is expected to slow the city's growth to just 0.7 per cent in 2023 before expanding to 2.4 per cent in 2024."

"Halifax's tourism sector should see another strong summer season in 2023 as inflation continues to cool, but the overall slower growth for the city is forecasted to keep GDP growth at 0.7 per cent in 2023 before rising to 2.2 per cent in 2024."

"Montreal's GDP growth is expected to slow significantly in 2023 to just 0.7 per cent, due to a combination of high interest rates, low consumer confidence and low immigration compared to other regions in Canada."

"A host of international and domestic challenges will impact Toronto's GDP growth in 2023 to just 0.6 per cent, but most of these issues are expected to subside in 2024 and help GDP climb by 2.9 per cent."

"Reduced purchasing power for consumers and higher borrowing costs for businesses will both have a major hand in dampening GDP in Vancouver, which is expected to see growth of just 0.5 per cent in 2023 and 2.8 per cent in 2024."

A former Ontario cabinet minister who has been the focus of intelligence leaks related to Chinese interference in Canada is suing CSIS, saying the spy agency publicly humiliated him because of a "stereotypical typecasting of immigrants born in China as being somehow untrustworthy."

Liberal Michael Chan, who's currently deputy mayor of the Toronto-area city of Markham, says possession by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service began in 2010 and has continued recently with disclosure of what he called unreliable and "flaw" intelligence reports.

Chan said unnamed CSIS employees not only broke federal secrecy laws when they gave media such information, they caused him real harm.

"Chan is justifiably proud of his Chinese heritage. But he is first and foremost a Canadian," says his statement of claim, filed in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. "He has devoted a good portion of his working life to public service to his country."

Due to the "misfeasance" of the CSIS leakers working with news outlets, "Chan has suffered pain, embarrassment, humiliation, stress and damage to his reputation, as well as threats to his personal well-being and that of his family," alleges the document. "It has particularly pained him to know that his family members have had to deal with this matter."

His lawsuit, filed Thursday, does not specify the amount of compensation he is requesting the Ontario Superior Court of Justice award him.

As well as suing CSIS itself, Chan has named service director David Vagozait, CSIS leakers identified by the pseudonyms John Doe and Jane Smith, Globe and Mail reporter Bob Fife and Globe News reporter Sam Cooper. The two journalists were behind the bulk of news reports on

Deputy mayor suing CSIS over alleged 'typecasting' of Chinese immigrants



controversial issues, from Hong Kong's now-crushed democracy movement to the arrest of a Huawei executive that led to the detention of two Canadians.

At a 2019 rally in Toronto, he defended attempts to suppress mass pro-democracy protests in the city, saying, "We support Hong Kong's police strictly handling unrest, Hong Kong's government carefully defending the rule of law, China's government carefully observing Hong Kong."

Days after Beijing imposed a harsh new national security law on Hong Kong in 2020, the China News Agency quoted Chan as praising the widely condemned legislation, saying it would bring stability and other benefits to the city.

He was quoted by China's news website as saying Canada was drawn into arresting Huawei's Meng Wanzhou on a U.S. extradition request largely because of a dispute over technology and trade between two world powers.

Chan worked to bring the Chinese government's controversial Confucius Institute to the Toronto public school board, before the board's tentative alliance with the organization was voted down by trustees.

And he was quoted by the official Xinhua news agency in 2009 as being moved by celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, saying "Great is my motherland, and great are the people of my motherland."

No statements of defense have yet been filed and Chan's allegations have not been proven in court.

CSIS was unable to provide comment by deadline.

The Globe and Mail and Global have both strongly defended their reports, saying the use of leaked intelligence documents was justified by the grave issues of public interest involved in the material.

Chan spent 11 years in provincial politics, retiring in 2018, then ran for the York Region council north of Toronto. As the candidate with the most votes in Markham he automatically became deputy mayor of the city.

In recent news reports quoting intelligence briefings on Beijing's interference, Chan was frequently mentioned as allegedly acting in the interests of China and at one point even being the subject of a CSIS wiretap request.

Chan's lawsuit says the accusations of disloyalty are all erroneous, charging that the intelligence was based on rumour, innuendo and

Canada welcomes Afghans through new humanitarian partnership

Toronto-Strong humanitarian partnerships to navigate complex geopolitical realities are crucial in bringing Afghans to safety in Canada. The Government of Canada continues to work with like-minded countries, partners in the region and non-governmental organizations to facilitate the safe movement of Afghans destined for Canada.

As part of a growing partnership with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, announced today that the Government of Canada has reached an agreement with the UAE, which will increase safe passage options for Afghans destined for Canada. As part of this partnership, Canada will resettle up to 1,000 Afghan nationals who were evacuated from Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul and are currently in the UAE.

With today's charter flight into Toronto, over 650 Afghan nationals have already arrived in Canada under this cooperation. Today's arrivals are destined to over 15 communities across Canada, including Kingston, St. Catharines, Toronto and Vancouver.

In 2022, also through cooperation with the UAE, Canada welcomed 3 flights of Afghan nationals, bringing our total arrivals from the UAE to over 1,500 to date.

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Canada's banks are guarding against bad loans. What this means for your money

Nestled in the balance sheets of Canada's biggest banks are fears that the economy is set for a rough patch that could see more Canadians defaulting on their loans.

While some experts say the country's banks are just "being prudent," they say that more signals choppy waters ahead for Canadians with outstanding loans as interest rates continue to put pressure on household budgets.

Canada's five biggest banks - RBC, Scotiabank, CIBC, BMO and TD Bank - moved in lockstep this past week to increase their loan loss provisions as they reported second-quarter earnings. All except for CIBC missed earnings expectations in the period.

Loan loss provisions, or provisions for credit losses, are essentially money that banks set aside in case the loans they've given out to clients go sour.

Laurence Booth, finance professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman

School of Management, says banks always try to put aside more money to cover these losses if they think their clients - be they everyday consumers, commercial customers or homeowners with a mortgage - are more likely to default on their loans.

"With fears of a recession mounting for much of the past year, Canada's banks are building up their reserves in case the economy takes a hit and Canadians or businesses aren't able to pay down their loans. This is (so) regular as clockwork. Whenever we get a slowdown in the economy, or a forecast of a slowdown... (the banks) increase their provisions," Booth tells Global News.

Both notes, as well, that just because banks are raising their provisions doesn't mean they'll need them if a pronounced recession doesn't come along.

The last time Canadian banks raised their loan loss provisions by significant magnitudes was at the start

of the COVID-19 pandemic, when they feared consumers would be out of work and without steady income for an uncertain period of time.

Gregory Taylor, chief investment officer at Purpose Investments, says banks quickly lowered those provisions again once the federal government stepped in with COVID support programs in the early months of the pandemic. "Now we're seeing them reverse that, put them back on and try to be a little bit cautious heading into what could be a volatile period," Taylor says.

"The banks are being a little prudent, from this point of view." Canadian banks not immune to U.S. turmoil.

Canadian bank loan provisions also extend to lenders' activities in the U.S. market. Booth notes, where the financial system has faced turmoil in recent months over the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and other regional players. While Canada's large and

What can we expect from clean hydrogen in Canada?

As the world races to find effective climate solutions, hydrogen is earning buzz as a potentially low-emitting alternative fuel source.

The promise of hydrogen as a clean fuel source is nothing new - as far back as the 1970s hydrogen was being promoted as a "potential pollution-free fuel for cars."

While hydrogen hasn't yet taken off as the fuel of the future - a 2023 report from McKinsey & Company and the Hydrogen Council estimates that there is a grand total of eight hydrogen vehicle fueling stations in Canada - many still hope that will change.

The hope is hydrogen will play a significant role in combating climate change, serving as a low-emissions substitute for fossil fuels in power generation, home heating and transportation, and today, interest in a Canadian clean hydrogen industry may be starting to bubble over.

"People are super excited about hydrogen because of the opportunity to use it as a clean chemical fuel. So, as a displacement for natural gas, diesel, gasoline, jet fuel," said Andrew Gillis, CEO of Canadian hydrogen company Aurora Hydrogen.

Plans for low or zero-emissions hydrogen projects are beginning to take shape across the country. But, at the moment, hydrogen is far from a low-emissions fuel, which is why some experts suggest expectations for the resource should be tempered.

The International Energy Agency indicates that in 2021, global hydrogen production emitted 900 million tonnes of carbon dioxide - roughly 180 million more than the aviation industry - as roughly 99 per cent of hydrogen production came from fossil fuel sources.

"There is a concern that the role of hydrogen in the process of decarbonization is being very greatly overstated," said Mark Winfield, professor of environmental and urban change at York University.

A growing consensus in 2020, the government released a hydrogen strategy, aiming to "cement hydrogen as a net-zero emissions by 2050 and position Canada as a global, industrial leader of clean-renewable fuels."

The latest budget includes over \$17 billion in tax credits between now and 2035 to help fund clean hydrogen projects. Today, the most common



application for hydrogen in Canada is as a material in industrial activities such as oil refining and ammonia, methanol and steel production, according to Natural Resources Canada. But, the buzz around hydrogen isn't exactly over its industrial applications, said Aurora Hydrogen's Gillis.

"All these sorts of things where we currently have emitting gaseous or liquid chemical fuels, hydrogen's an opportunity to replace those and access the energy without creating emissions at the point of use," Gillis said.

When used in a fuel cell, hydrogen can produce electricity for transportation, heating and power generation without producing common harmful emissions like nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons and particulate matter - BloombergNEF estimates that hydrogen could meet 24 per cent of global energy demand by 2050.

A growing industry Canada's hydrogen strategy aims to have 30 per cent of end-use energy be from clean hydrogen by 2050. According to the strategy, Canada produces an estimated three million tonnes of hydrogen per year from natural gas today, but the strategy doesn't indicate how much hydrogen is produced from low-emissions sources.

In recent years, the Canadian clean hydrogen industry has earned international interest. In 2021, Canada signed a memorandum of understanding with the Netherlands to help develop "export-import corridors for clean hydrogen" between the two countries. Canada also recently inked a deal with Germany to start exporting the resource from 2025.

But while a low-emissions hydrogen plant went online in Beauséjour, Que., in 2021, the rest of Canada's clean-hydrogen industry seems to be in the early stages.

This past winter, the federal government and Alberta announced a \$461-million investment in a hydrogen plant in Edmonton that would use carbon-capture technology and is aiming to produce in 2024. Atura Power is set to have a Niagara, Ont., plant operational in 2024, while both the Variances Carbon Recycling Plant in Vancouver, Que., and HTEC's clean hydrogen plant in Vancouver aim to be online by 2025.

What is clean hydrogen? The emissions capacity of hydrogen is dependent not only on how hydrogen is used, but also how it is produced.

Hydrogen produced from fossil fuel sources often uses steam-methane reforming - a method of separating hydrogen from carbon in natural gas - and is commonly referred to as "grey hydrogen," said Winfield.

Lower-emissions hydrogen can be produced with fossil fuels using carbon capture and is often referred to as "blue hydrogen."

Emissions-free hydrogen - or "green hydrogen" - is typically produced by using renewable electricity for electrolysis, a process of splitting water into hydrogen and oxygen without producing carbon emissions.

"How you make your hydrogen counts quite significantly in terms of how helpful it is or how kind of trade-offs you're involved in," Winfield said.

"Rainbow of bullshit" Paul Martin, chemical engineer and co-founder of the Hydrogen Science Coalition, says the so-called "rainbow of bullshit" is more myth than reality.

"There is only one colour: the rainbow of hydrogen is this number of bullshit," he said.

On the global scale, nearly all hydrogen production is from

high-emitting grey sources, according to the International Energy Agency; less than one per cent of the world's hydrogen production uses carbon capture or electrolysis.

Martin has doubts about the viability of green and blue hydrogen. One consideration is the cost of production, he said.

Compared to grey hydrogen, blue hydrogen can be over 40 per cent more expensive, while green hydrogen can be 32 per cent to nearly 300 per cent more costly, according to Canada's Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development.

Winfield said efficiency also needs to be considered - using electricity to produce green hydrogen for fuel adds unnecessary steps to the energy process.

For example, rather than use electricity to produce green hydrogen, which is then used in a fuel cell for home heating, it would be more efficient to pump that electricity directly into something like a heat-pump, Winfield said.

As well, there's a lack of infrastructure. Winfield said, pointing out that hydrogen can't be shipped using existing natural gas infrastructure.

A 2022 audit from Canada's Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development found that Canada's hydrogen strategy was "overly optimistic," in terms of the greenhouse reducing capabilities of hydrogen.

Niche applications Aurora Hydrogen uses microwave energy to convert methane into hydrogen and solid carbon, which Gillis says will produce no CO2 emissions and use 80 per cent less electricity than electrolysis.

"There's lots of stuff that people are going to want to electrify, and hydrogen production is probably going to be lower on the list," Gillis said.

"So the extent that we can produce hydrogen with a minimum amount of electricity required, we think that's a strong benefit."

Gillis believes his technology can be scaled up efficiently. He aims to reuse existing natural gas and electricity infrastructure - not to ship hydrogen but to ramp up production of hydrogen quickly and cost-effectively at the point where the resource will be used.

But Auma's new technology will be put to the test this year at their first demonstration plant outside of Edmonton, which Gillis says will produce enough hydrogen to fuel 10 buses continuously.

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Trudeau says Ottawa is ready to support fire-ravaged Nova Scotia 'in any ways we can'

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says the federal government is ready to help the thousands of Nova Scotians fleeing wildfires "in any ways we can."

An estimated 16,400 people have been affected by evacuation orders as a rapidly spreading fire burns in the Halifax area, covering about 788 hectares.

Hundreds of residents of a southwestern community also have had to flee as a separate wildfire burns out of control in Shelburne County.

"We're going to be there for the people of Nova Scotia as they deal with those terrible wildfires," Trudeau said ahead of a meeting with Island's Premier Gabriel Duménil on Monday.

The prime minister said he plans to speak to Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston and Halifax Mayor Mike Savage later in the day to assure them "the federal government will be there to support in any ways we can, as people are dealing with some pretty



terrifying situations."

"We'll always be there to try to help make sure that nobody gets hurt in this very, very difficult moment," he added. Halifax fire chief said it could take days to extinguish.

The Halifax-area fire was first reported Sunday afternoon and continues to pose a risk Monday. The wind is blowing from the north, causing the fire to blow back on itself - and there's no rain in the immediate forecast.

"We have a lot of work to do today, this week, for many days,"

said Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency Deputy Chief Dave Melchiorre.

"It's going to take some time. These fires don't simply extinguish today and you're done. There's significant work that's required to come in and dig any hidden fires out, and make sure there's no smouldering fire that's going to reignite."

The evacuations cover the communities of Hammonds Plains, Upper Tantallon and Pockwock, about 25 kilometres from Halifax. They're home to many commuters

who work in the city. Fire officials said Monday that while no injuries have been reported, "numerous" buildings in the affected suburbs have been damaged or lost.

The cause of the Halifax fire is under investigation.

The Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources and Renewables said the Shelburne County forest fire has grown to 6,270 hectares.

Some structures have been destroyed and others are threatened but there are no human casualties, it said.

Minister concerned about firefighting resources

The Nova Scotia fires are just the latest to erupt during an unrelenting fire season that has scorched thousands of hectares of land and disrupted tens of thousands of lives.

A blaze in northeastern British Columbia has grown significantly, triggering evacuation orders. As of Sunday afternoon, the Demisee Creek blaze, burning southeast of Fort Nelson, covered an area of nearly 136,000 hectares.

Neighbouring Alberta is still grappling with an intense wildfire season - at one point, nearly 100 fires were burning more than one million hectares of land in the province and displacing close to 30,000 people. While some people have been allowed to return home, officials in Alberta warn the threat is not over.

shortages, HHHS had to make the difficult decision to consolidate emergency services at one location, in order to ensure it could maintain delivery of emergency services for all of Haliburton County."

Like Haliburton Highlands and many other hospitals across the province, the Perth and Smiths Falls District Hospital has had to rely on nursing agencies to bolster staffing levels. That has left the eastern Ontario hospital with a stable staffing situation, but at a net cost of \$2.8 million just last year, said president and CEO Michael Cohen.

No injuries reported

Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency Deputy Chief Dave Meldrum said in an update Monday morning no injuries have been reported, but "numerous" buildings have been affected or lost, including in the Westwood subdivision, near Hammonds Plains Road, and Yanketown Road and northward to Pockwock Road. No one has been reported missing, he said.

On Sunday, the number of buildings consumed by fire was believed to be 10. Meldrum did not have an update on Monday morning, but said the number is likely to rise.

He said he could not provide a list of street names where houses were damaged, adding that on some streets, one home could have escaped

Thousands of homes under evacuation order as Halifax-area wildfire burns out of control

A wildfire that has consumed numerous homes is still burning out of control northwest of Halifax on Monday, with thousands of residences under an mandatory evacuation order.

The evacuations cover areas of Hammonds Plains, Upper Tantallon and Pockwock, suburban communities about 25 kilometres from Halifax that are home to many commuters who work in the city.

During a news briefing on Monday afternoon, Premier Tim Houston said financial support up to \$500 would be available to households in evacuated areas. More details on eligibility and how residents can register will be available Tuesday.

"We're going to work with the Red Cross to make that funding available to you as soon as possible," Houston said.

The provincial Department of Natural Resources and Renewables (DNRR) reported just after 3 p.m. on Monday that the fire was still estimated to cover 788 hectares.

More than 200 firefighters are battling the blaze, including 170 from the Halifax Regional Municipality, 32 from DNRR, and seven from the Department of National Defence.

Thirty Halifax fire trucks are on scene, as well as two DNRR helicopters and one water bomber that was sent from Newfoundland and Labrador, Houston said support is also coming in from New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

The Halifax Regional Municipality said 16,400 people have been affected by evacuations.

He said the fire was first reported on Sunday around 3:30 p.m. in the Westwood Hills subdivision off Hammonds Plains Road. The cause of the fire is under investigation.



unscathed while another close by could be destroyed.

Houston said he can appreciate how stressful it would be, not knowing the state of your home.

"We'll get through this. It's going to take time and it will require patience. But we will get through this," Houston said.

The province will do its best to provide updated information about wildfires in the province, Houston said.

Work is underway to support contact centres and first responders, he said. The province will pay the mileage for volunteer firefighters who travel to another community to fight fires, including wildfires. In a news release, the province said volunteer fire departments can submit their invoices to the provincial Emergency Management Office.

Meldrum said an inventory will be conducted and people will be informed by the municipality or province as soon as possible if their home was affected.

Meldrum said the wind is now blowing from the north, which will push the fire back toward where it was burning on Sunday. But he said that can still pose a danger.

"This was really fast, really hot fire yesterday. There's a lot of unburned fuel still in the areas that the fire went through that can reignite and can burn. So we have a lot of work to do today, this week, for many days."

A home destroyed by fire is seen in the Westwood Hills subdivision on Monday morning in the Upper Tantallon area, about 25 km northwest of Halifax. (Mary-Catherine McKeown/CBC News)

The fire was first reported on Sunday around 3:30 p.m. in the Westwood Hills subdivision off Hammonds Plains Road. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

"refrain from filming and taking photos of the fire area, including flying personal drones." The use of all off-highway vehicles is banned within the limits of the Halifax Regional Municipality while the local state of emergency is in effect. There is also a province-wide ban on bonfires.

Halifax Mayor Mike Savage described the wildfire as "unprecedented" during the news briefing.

While he wouldn't say how many homes were lost, he said many residents would be dealing with a number of losses. "He also warned people not to re-enter the evacuation zone. "It's a very stressful time for people," he said earlier on Monday. "It's life-changing for people who have been impacted by this. It's a very serious fire."

Savage said Monday he spoke with provincial Emergency Management Office Minister John Loe, Premier Tim Houston and the federal minister of emergency preparedness, Bill Blair, on Sunday evening.

"All efforts are being made to support fighting the fire today," Savage said.

He added that a priority will be determining what homes have been affected by the fire, and sharing that information with residents.

In the meantime, he said, people need to avoid the affected areas.

"It's really important ... that people not go back onto the scene. The fires can start and restart. We don't know where it could be affected next, so people have to stay away,"

Consent orders

The Halifax Regional Municipality declared a local state of emergency Sunday night in order to access additional supports.

Consent orders have been opened at:

- Black Point and Arns Community Centre, 8575 St. Margarets Bay Rd.
- Beaver Bank Kinross Community Centre, 1583 Beaver Bank Rd.
- Canada Games Centre, 26 Thomas Road/DL 2.

The senior manager for the Canadian Red Cross's emergency management team, Ancel Langille, said 15 people stayed at the Canada Games Centre evacuation centre on Sunday night. He said he's already received word that more will be staying there on Monday night.

Evacuees are feeling anxious, Langille said.

"A lot of people aren't going to know the status of their homes right now, and I know that must be very difficult for people. We're doing our best to support them and to give them what we can to provide that comfort until they're able to get official confirmations."

Ontario hospitals prepare and brace for summer ER staffing challenges

Hospitals in smaller and rural Ontario communities have been retraining, training, and poring over schedules in the hopes of avoiding another summer wave of temporary ER closures - though the problem never really went away.

Staffing shortages led hospitals to close their emergency departments for hours or even days at a time during the summer of 2022.

Health Minister Sylvia Jones noted at the time that similar staffing challenges and closures were seen across the country, and that there was a high rate of health-care workers taking well-deserved vacation time.

But the closures did not stop at the end of the summer vacation period. South Bruce Grey Health Centre had overnight ER closures at all of its four sites through the fall, and had to fully close its Chelsey ER for two months. The hospital has noted a shortage of nurses there since before the pandemic and the site still only operates Monday to Friday, during the day.

Other temporary closures were reported in the province during the winter, and now, just as the summer season is due to arrive, there have been more than half a dozen closures in recent days - including for 48 hours recently in Thessalon, a town in northern Ontario.

"I would be surprised if it's the only one [this summer] and I'm not happy about having to say that," said North Shore Health Network president and CEO Tim Vine.

The network has hospitals in Thessalon, Blind River and Richards Landing, Ont.

"It's obviously something that we agonize about and we do everything we possibly can to avoid, but I don't see any other way through the summer without having some closures, and they will almost certainly not be limited to Thessalon," he said.

Thessalon has been without a primary care physician for about two years, contributing to higher ER

volumes. It has been relying on doctors from other communities to serve the hospital on an temporary basis, but those can be hard to attract, Vine said.

No end in sight to staffing shortages

In Minden, Ont., the hospital has decided to permanently close the local ER as of June 1, due to staff shortages. It saw no closures last summer, but Carolyn Plummer, president and CEO of Haliburton Highlands Health Services, said there were many close calls that would have led to short-notice temporary closures of either the Minden or Haliburton ERs - or both.

"While there were shortages prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were significantly exacerbated by the pandemic, which did require HHHS to turn to nursing agencies to fill scheduling gaps," Plummer wrote in a statement.

"It is worse than last year. With no end in sight to these sorts of staffing

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