



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT BOARD OF HEALTH

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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Board of Health Meeting

January 10, 2022

Remote via Zoom

Present	Board Member
X	Dr. Robin Blair, Chair
X	Dr. Sam Merabi
X	Dr. Robert Slocum

Health Department Staff present:

Frank Giacalone, Director of Public Health

Michael Lawler, Office Manager – Health & Recycling Departments

I. Call to Order

Meeting called to order at 7:06pm by Dr. Blair.

II. Approval of Minutes

December 09, 2021 Meeting Minutes. Motion to approve by Dr. Slocum, Dr. Merabi seconded. Motion to approve passed.

III. COVID-19 Update

Numbers in the city are climbing. Month-to-date we have had 440 cases. Had 99 cases in one day earlier this month. No new deaths this month. Mostly seeing cases in Nursing Homes/Congregate Cares as well as childcare centers.

Newburyport 14-day positivity (from 1/2/22 - 1/15/22) is 16.19%. Massachusetts is at 20.61%. Amesbury is 17.83%, Newbury is 19.25%, Salisbury is 24.22%, West Newbury is 17.16%.

Schools are still providing test-and-stay. Childcare is not yet allowed to go onto this program. DESE came out with new guidance saying that schools did not need to contact trace and no longer need to do test-and-stay, but are giving at-home test kits and saying test before coming in.

Dr. Merabi asked about AJH status, Director Giacalone did not have those numbers on hand but brought up the states interactive dashboard that shows hospitalizations by region. Dr. Merabi explained that a colleague of his had a heart issue and went to the ER at AJH. Had to stay overnight but had to stay in ER all night because no rooms were open because of COVID. Found this alarming and it was just last week. Director Giacalone will call AJH and see what their status is and report back.

Dr. Slocum asked about the update where hospitals were going to start doing their numbers by people admitted due to COVID vs people who had COVID but that was not their primary chief complaint. Michael Lawler saw this reported in the Boston Globe and would send the link out to the Board.

a. COVID Testing

Health Department purchased a pallet of test kits for just over \$75,000.00. Hosted a drive-thru event on Saturday and gave out 4,000 kits (8,000 tests) on just that day alone. Very good turn out and a lot of positive feedback.

Breakdown of at-home kit distribution:

Housing – *450 kits to Newburyport Housing Authority, 180 kits to James Steam Mill, 180 kits to Heritage House*

Seniors – *800-900 kits to Senior Center*

Community – *4,000 through our drive-thru event*

City Staff – *working on getting kits out to all staff*

We also gave at-home test kits to the three Afghan families that are being housed in Newburyport.

In addition to at-home kits, Health Department still does testing as needed at City Hall for staff.

Health Department hosted testing clinics over the past two weeks at the Harbormaster Office. Finished up the last clinic today. In total about 300-400 tests were done for the community.

b. Indoor Mask Mandate

For Discussion by the Board, Health Department received two calls asking for exceptions to the mandate:

- *Newburyport Tennis Club - asking if members could remove their mask while playing tennis on the court but would keep them on in common areas (previous guidance classified tennis as a low-risk sport and allowed for masks to be taken off while playing)*

- *Performing Arts Center – asking if performers need to wear masks (original guidance allowed if a certain distance was kept between the performers and the audience)*

Dr. Merabi believes that performers need to wear masks. There is evidence of high transmission when acting because of the droplets produced when doing lines and acting. Believes that there are a few options that would allow them to not need the mask but questions the ability for the performing arts center to do them. One option is socially distanced acting between performers, another is testing and keeping a bubble, and the third would be to have plastic shields as masks.

Dr. Blair agrees that performers should wear masks as long as the mask mandate is in effect and he thinks that the tennis players should be able to have them off while playing tennis.

Dr. Slocum disagrees. Kids go to the tennis club and it is fairly busy there. Wonders what the point is to give exceptions. Board is doing so much work and so are the schools to keep everything open. Doesn't make sense to him to allow masks in some places but not others.

Consensus among Board is to not allow exceptions.

Indoor Mask Mandate – extension discussion

Dr. Blair states that in his opinion when they made the decision in December to implement the mandate that they would rescind it when the numbers started to come down. The numbers are still high but in the past few days the numbers have started to come down. The question for the Board is whether or not to extend the mandate past February 1, 2022.

Dr. Slocum asked when the schools had their mask mandate into effect. (Michael believes that it is end of February). Would have voted to implement the mask mandate and thinks that lifting it would send the wrong message right now. If the kids are wearing them in schools, what is the difference for adults to wear them when going into stores and such.

Dr. Merabi spoke to when we talk about the numbers coming down, the numbers were high to begin with. So, when they come down a little, it is still really high. There will also likely be a long tail of coming down from this surge. The numbers are also actually higher than they are due to home testing. Really wished we had hospital numbers to see where they are at. Does not think that lifting it on

February 1st is not a good idea, especially since we are still in winter and there are lots of indoor activities.

Motion to extend the mask mandate to February 28, 2022 and revisit it at the February 17, 2022 meeting. Motion to extend mask mandate by Dr. Slocum, seconded by Dr. Merabi. Motion passed.

IV. General Department Updates

Frank's last day will be tomorrow, January 21, 2022. Tough decision but will be moving on to Danvers. Joe Tabbi has offered to assist in the interim, Frank has also offered to assist as needed.

Thirsty Whale reopening within next two weeks hopefully.

Nu Kitchen is hoping to open within the next few weeks as well.

New smoothie/juice establishment remodeling the old pet shop in Port Plaza. Still a lot of work to do there so more to come later.

Applying for grant with the state to regionalize with Salisbury, Newbury, and Rowley for inspectional and nursing services.

V. Other Matters

Dr. Slocum expressed interest in finding a grant that would help with transportation for kids that helps connect Ward 5/6 with the community better. Thinking of a trolley that could go through the wards and make a loop going by the schools, YWCA, downtown, Youth Services, etc. Problem is that there are so many kids that live in the Turkey Hill area and there is no safe route to connect them with the rest of the city.

Mayor Reardon chimed in on the idea of transportation for kids saying that it was a big issue on the campaign trail especially for Wards 5/6 and Plum Island. Will have Nancy London (Grant Developer for the City) be on the lookout for something like this.

The Board extended their thanks to Frank on his service to the city and wished him luck in his next role

VI. Next Meeting

February 17, 2022 at 7:00pm.

VII. Adjourn

Motion to adjourn by Dr. Slocum, seconded by Dr. Merabi.

Meeting adjourned at 7:58pm.