



**CITY OF NEWBURYPORT
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

NEWBURYPORT CITY HALL
TEL: 978-465-4410

60 PLEASANT STREET

NEWBURYPORT, MA 01950
FAX: 978-465-9958

WWW.CITYOFNEWBURYPORT.COM

****Emergency COVID-19 Meeting****
Newburyport Board of Health
December 30, 2021
Meeting Minutes

In Attendance:

Board of Health Members	Dr. Robin Blair, Chair Dr. Sam Merabi
Health Department Staff	Frank Giacalone, Director of Public Health Michael Lawler, Office Manager
Public Comment	Bruce Menin (School Committee) Sarah Hall (School Committee) City Councilor Sharif Zeid City Councilor Jim McCauley Mayor Donna Holaday City Councilor Barry Connell Nate Allard (Chamber of Commerce) Nancy Caswell Dr. Glenn Focht, MD (CMO @ AJH)

I. Call to Order

Dr. Blair called the meeting to order at 5:03 pm.

II. Public Comment

Dr. Blair reminded the public of the public comment rules. Remarks are limited to two (2) minutes per speaker and if the public comment section continues for an extended period of time, the chair may end that section of the meeting and instruct people to send their comments in via email to the Board. Also, if you are agreeing with the person who just spoke or someone who spoke before you, please state that and add anything new.

Bruce Menin – 141 High St

Encouraged the Board to consider a city wide indoor mask mandate. His son and son’s friends were just all together indoors and unmasked with no vaccine cards checked and they all came down with the virus. Thinks a mask mandate is a prudent thing to do at this time.

Sarah Hall – 8 Arthur Welch Dr

Seconded Bruce Menin's comment. Commended the Board for convening the emergency meeting on this important matter. An indoor mask mandate is easy, free, and quick to implement and the scientific data shows that it is the best defense to the current surge.

City Councilor Sharif Zeid

Would like to continue to urge caution and consideration while proceeding tonight. Not personally in favor of a mask mandate for many reasons. Thinks there is significant jurisdictional and legal issues when it comes to this. Public Health Emergency by the Governor was left to expire and MGL's do not enable you to do what you may be considering. Finds it difficult to understand why we would treat "healthy" people undifferentiable from "unhealthy" people which is the basis of public health in his opinion. Difficult to see how this process is sustainable in the long term. Concerned about the messaging that we are sending with these policies are considered. Thinks this needs to be looked at in the broad public health perspective in terms of economy and in schools and such.

City Councilor Jim McCauley

Would like to make a point of order. The City Council legislative session ended on December 13th and one thing still in committee was Appointment 165 (Reappointment of Dr. Blair to the Board of Health) and it was never gotten to. Do you have a quorum for this meeting?

Mayor Donna Holaday

Appreciate the response to her ask for this meeting. Would like to make a point of clarification to Councilor McCauley's point of order. Since the previous council did not act on the reappointment of Dr. Blair in a timely matter, per the City Charter, the appointment automatically goes through, thus meaning that Dr. Blair was reappointed to the Board of Health and there is a quorum at this meeting. Understands the concerns and legal issues, but what is happening across the country, state, and our own region is that local municipalities are issuing these orders to protect residents. The numbers are through the roof and are as high as last December. This new strain is very contagious. Everyone knows someone who has tested positive. We need to get on top of this. Many businesses are asking for this because they do not want to be alone in doing this. Ask to Frank, was to do this for just a month, just to get us through this surge. Restaurants are already seeing 50-70% cancellation rate in reservations ahead of the New Years festivities and we need to act now. We are not doing enforcement/mask police, but it gives a level of security to people that they need to wear a mask when going into businesses. Asking that the Board of Health implement a mask mandate then reevaluate in a month to see where we are at.

City Councilor Barry Connell

Agrees with the Mayor on the point of clarification on the reappointment of Dr. Blair. Similar to first two comments, we have an exceptional set of circumstances right now. Has spoken with a few restaurant owners, and they asked that he voice their support of

this indoor mask mandate. They have a hard time enforcing a mask mandate in their businesses when there is a not a mandate within the city. Understands the sensitivity and understands businesses are struggling, but the severity of the situation demands action. Encourages the board to impose the measures with the option to back away if circumstances allow.

Nate Allard, Greater Newburyport Chamber of Commerce

Consistency is key. Consistent policies with our surrounding towns make for an easier consumer experience.

Nancy Caswell

Thanked the Board for meeting on the mask mandate. Think it is important to bring this into play, especially downtown. Many downtown restaurants saw a busy October and November but a slow December. Can personally attest that over half of her reservations were cancelled ahead of the holidays and has customers wanting to know what safety measures they were taking. She has maintained masking at her restaurants and has seen low numbers of transmission. She admits she was originally worried about the image of reinstating a mask mandate back in August, but with the current uptick in cases, she thinks it is in the best interest of the city.

Dr. Glenn Focht, MD

Chief Medical Officer at the AJH. Strongly supports the Board in instituting a city-wide mask mandate for indoor settings. With the new variant that is highly infectious and the evidence we have that the Omicron variant can cause infection among the vaccinated and boosted, the AJ is seeing large numbers of patients needing medical care. Most of the patients requiring medical care are unvaccinated, but there are a small number of patients that are vaccinated becoming ill. There are also two other factors stressing the healthcare system this year. There is a very active influenza season right now (masks also help with lowering influenza rates). Workforce is diminished due to people being ill with COVID-19 and due to people leaving the workforce. The hospital is stressed and stretched thin at this time to continue to meet the needs of the community. There are currently over 25 critically ill COVID-19 patients in the hospital at this time. For reference, at the end of November, that number was 5-6 patients.

III. COVID-19 Updates

- Percent Positivity – 7.12%
 - o Keeps going up. We jumped from 4.99% last week to the 7.12% this week.
 - o During summer we were only at about 2%
- Cases
 - o We used to have single digits of cases coming in each day, but now we are getting into having case counts of 20's, 30's, 40's on a single day.
 - o Already at 370 positive cases for the month. On track to bypass our highest case month (December 2021).
- Vaccination Rates

- 82% of city fully vaccinated
- 32% of city boosted
- Outlook of Projected Cases via Boston Globe
 - MA could see north of 80,000 cases per day with no interventions at its current rate
 - With masks, it would be closer to 50,000 cases per day.
- Testing
 - Did testing clinics on the day before Thanksgiving and then the day before Christmas Eve
 - Hope for January is to do somewhere in the range of 12 testing clinics throughout the month
 - Also do employee testing on the regular. Just today, did testing at DPS after a positive case and identified two additional cases out of 14 total tested there. (Both were asymptomatic positives)
 - Working on getting at-home test kits to give out to our residents. We did not get any at-home kits from the state because we were not below the federal poverty level. If we do get at-home kits we will make sure to get them out to our most vulnerable populations.
- Vaccine Clinics
 - Did about 600 booster doses between December 12th and December 17th.

IV. City-wide Mask Mandate for Public Indoor Settings

- Dr. Blair thanks everyone for their comments and recognizes some may be opposed, but thinks the Board should consider a mask mandate for indoor settings.
- Dr. Merabi recognized that there was opposition and confusion back in August when the Board did a mask mandate for municipal buildings, but at that meeting all indications and modeling were that numbers will spike, like it just did. At the time of that meeting we were only dealing with Delta and now we have Delta and Omicron. We are basically starting over because of this new variant. To the comment that the measures are not working is just wrong. Vaccine is a layer of protection. Mask is a layer of protection. What you do with layers of protection is layer them. Society can not function if our hospitals are overwhelmed and what is at risk is a shut down.
- Mandatory masking at all indoor vendors through February 1st at which time the Board will revisit the mandate.

Dr. Merabi made a motion to institute an indoor mask mandate, Dr. Blair seconded. Motion passed 2-0.

V. City of Newburyport Inauguration Ceremonies

- Health Dept received a call or two in regards to the inauguration.
- Frank feels comfortable that this can go on with the safety measures they implemented.
- School Committee and City Council will take oaths in the council chambers separately with limited guests.

- Mayor's inauguration will take place after both of these ceremonies up in the auditorium.
- Set up has three feet between chairs with overflow moving upstairs. Ample seating and space on the stage as well.
- Mayor-elect Reardon:
 - o Not what he was envisioning when planning the inauguration, but believes this is a plan that works for the current situation.
 - o Cancelled luncheon that was planned for after off-site.
- Question about standing room. – Not a good idea to allow this. We reduced capacity of the room to 25% and standing room defeats that purpose. We need room for people to move around.

VI. Updated COVID-19 Sickness Guidance for City Employees

- New CDC guidance that the state adopted is confusing and the Health Dept does not agree with it.
- With employees, we want to be a bit stricter and require testing to return to work.
- Dr. Blair has no issues with the new guidance for city workers.
- Dr. Merabi worried about wording (since not everyone outside the medical field knows what it means) but overall liked the flow of it.

VII. Adjourn

Motion to adjourn.

Meeting adjourned at 5:53pm.