

Nov 05 2021 3:04 pm

Office of the

Board of Health
City Hall
718 Main Street
Fitchburg, Massachusetts 01420
978-829-1870

A regular meeting of the Board of Health was held on Thursday, September 2, 2021 at 5:00 pm.

Present: Stephen Curry, Director; Ian Murray, Sandra Knipe, Dr. Bogdasarian, Chief Ernest Martineau, Attorney Vincent Pusateri, City Solicitor, Jacquelyn Wehtje, Resident and Petitioner.

Hearing Request regarding August 5, 2021 Mask Mandate and amended August 25, 2021: Jacquelyn Wehtje – [REDACTED] Petitioner to remove BOH Mask Mandate:

Dr. Bogdasarian stated Ms. Wehtje is here to express her concerns for the mask mandate.

Ms. Wehtje stated she is here to protest the forcing of vaccinated people to wear masks inside city buildings including the library, which has an ineffective A/C system and is extremely hot and humid with temperatures in the 90's she felt as though she would pass out being made to wear a mask when she went there on August 25. Prior to the city mandate, the library had an excellent policy with masks required in the children's library and the adult library and now she will not return until the mask mandate is removed.

Ms. Wehtje stated people's rights to breathe freely without the mask should not be infringed upon since Massachusetts has ample vaccines, PPE as well as an excellent vaccination rate. If you are thinking about the mask or no mask you are missing the boat, masks are not the solution but vaccines are. When you force vaccinated people to wear a mask for what is now a second year you send the message that vaccines don't work and that there is no advantage to getting vaccinated because you face the same restrictions as the people who aren't vaccinated. You discourage people from getting the vaccine or the booster shot because we are still having our civil liberties taken away so what was the point of getting the shot. This being the case why should anyone even get the booster shot.

Ms. Wehtje stated people with medical backgrounds are wearing N95 masks and are securely placed precisely on your face ensuring a tight fit across the bridge of the nose and no air flow and that is not how everyone else wears masks. People are reusing masks, masks straps are breaking off, eye glasses are fogging up, people can't talk and understand what they are saying so they pulling down there masks just to breathe and removing the mask anyway. This is a piece of political theatre to make people think something is being done to keep them safe it's not, in fact single masks are so ineffective at one time the Federals were telling people to double up the masks but there was so much resistance, they dropped that idea.

Ms. Wehtje is asking the BOH to drop the mask mandate to vaccinated people. This will show the vaccine is working and keeping people safe and things can return to normal. If people refuse to get vaccinated that is there right and it's time for personal responsibilities not government mandates. Don't make vaccinated people wear masks because people choose not to be vaccinated.

Ms. Wehtje stated she was looking at the statistics and the average age of deaths from Covid-19 going back to May 1 show children are really not affected by Covid-19 the way adults are. This past week there were 2 deaths in all of Worcester County. The average age of death is people in their 70's. Dr. Bogdasarian stated he appreciates Ms. Wehtje concerns and feels everyone who can receive the vaccine should get the vaccine as it's the best protection we have so far. There has been some indication when the schools reach 80% vaccination rate the mask mandate can be lifted.

Dr. Bogdasarian feels that wearing a mask verses no mask at all is better than nothing and is still beneficial. Studies show that there is a 20% reduction in infections just from masks alone even without vaccines. Social distancing and staying 6ft apart is difficult in school situations therefore masks become even more important. We are still learning how long immunity from the vaccine will be present and how long it will last. As human viruses come along the current vaccines may not be as effective. Dr. Bogdasarian recommends everyone get the booster shot.

Dr. Bogdasarian stated the reason why we made this decision in the first place regarding the mask mandate is the Board of Health's purpose is to protect the population in Fitchburg as well as keep everyone safe. Dr. Bogdasarian recommends social distancing, wearing the mask and practice good hand washing. Throughout the country they are seeing more children get sick, about 2% of children and the younger age groups are ending up in intensive care units. Kids are not completely immune. We want more people vaccinated so when we reach the 80% we can stop wearing the masks but until then we need to keep wearing the masks as they are the best protection right now.

Dr. Bogdasarian stated people who choose not to get vaccinated will find they can get ill and not survive. People who don't get vaccinated may find they may not be able to work in health care facilities, and no longer work in restaurants, airlines and many more places.

Dr. Bogdasarian stated we may look back in 20 years and say we overdid it with the masks but for now its keeping people safe. Ms. Wehtje stated that the board would rather take away people's rights than practice some benefit you think is effective at preventing the flu or any other respiratory infections. Dr. Bogdasarian stated that we just don't have a right to endanger other people.

Dr. Bogdasarian stated that this is a Board of Health decision and in no way is political and the board feels it is what is best for the community.

Ms. Wehtje stated she disagrees and is asking to pull back this mask mandate.

Dr. Bogdasarian stated that last year kids were not in school but kids being in school now and congregating which in turn may cause more clusters and kids getting sick.

Ms. Knipe stated she does contact tracing and kids being in school only three days has placed her in a position to work endless hours because of sick kids in Fitchburg, Leominster, and Gardner etc.

Ms. Wehtje asked if kids were in the hospital. Ms. Knipe stated they are not in the hospital.

Dr. Bogdasarian stated we will start seeing Covid-19 cases in children.

Ms. Wehtje stated if there is a state mandate covering schools and daycares why did you feel the need to add an additional city mandate? Why not remove the City of Fitchburg's mask mandate.

Mr. Curry stated this mandate was adopted on August 5, 2021 which covers the schools and municipal buildings. The DESE mandate didn't come until August 18, 2021. This mandate also cover the Fitchburg Housing Authority and Fitchburg State University.

Ms. Wehtje asked why there is a \$300.00 dollar fine which she feels is completely outrageous. Ms. Knipe said we are not trying to fine people we are trying to only protect the general public. Mr. Curry stated we are looking to address the issues and educate residents and looking for compliance, not make money on fines.

Attorney Pusateri stated we could amend the regulation to state that the violation would be up to a \$300.00 fine. If tickets are issued and folks don't have the funds to pay they could go to court.

Ms. Wehtje asked Chief Martineau if he wants his Police department going around enforcing this mandate.

Chief Martineau stated he follows his guidance from the Health Department. It's not his primary duty to be enforcing BOH policy, although being an agent of the BOH he does have the authority if he needs to.

After lengthy discussion and questions from Ms. Wehtje to the BOH members Dr. Bogdasarian thanked Ms. Wehtje for coming in and expressing her concerns and opinion.

COVID-19 update: Confirmed cases, vaccination rates, clinics:

Mr. Curry stated as of today there are 111 active cases in the City of Fitchburg. There has been 7 cases in the last 24 hours, 51 in the last week, 112 cases in the last two weeks and 188 in the last 30 days. The grand total is 5,020 cases since March 1, 2020.

Approve meeting minutes:

Sandra Knipe made a motion to approve the August 25, 2021 meeting minutes as is. Motion was 2nd by Ian Murray. Dr. B abstained. All were in favor. Motion carries.

Ms. Knipe made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of August 5, 2021. Motion was 2nd by Ian Murray. All were in favor. Motion carries.

Staffing Updates:

Mr. Curry stated there has been an offer issued to a candidate for the position of Vaccine Coordinator. The interviewing for the position for a Food & Milk Inspector is still ongoing and hoping to have a decision in the coming weeks. Mr. Curry stated they will be positing a position for an Assistant Director/Deputy Inspector to oversee the office and the Inspectional Services. This position will replace a Sanitary Inspector who recently retired. The Weights and Measures position will also be posted shortly.

Title 5-Local Upgrade Approvals (LUA):

Mr. Curry stated there has been no plans received as of yet.

Ms. Knipe made a motion to table the LUA's to a future meeting. Motion was 2nd by Ian Murray. All were in favor. Motion carries.

Sandra Knipe made a motion to adjourn at 6:15. Motion 2nd by Ian Murray. All were in favor. Motion carries.