

Shedding the masks for good

After Oregon lifts them, mask requirements will be unlikely to return even in areas with coronavirus flare ups

By **AIMEE GREEN**
The Oregonian

SALEM — As Oregon counts down the days until Gov. Kate Brown lifts coronavirus restrictions, one of the state's top health officials said Friday, June 11, it's highly unlikely mask requirements would return even in the event of outbreaks in counties with low vaccination rates.

Brown has pledged to lift mask requirements in all but a few situations when 70% of Oregonians 18 and older are at least partially vaccinated, which is projected to happen later this month.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Oregon's epidemiologist and health officer, said he doubts the Oregon Health Authority would recommend reinstating mask requirements and other COVID-19 safety precautions down the road. "But I don't want to take anything off the table if the situation dramatically changes," he said.

Some counties with a history of significant coronavirus spread now have vaccination rates as low as 35% among those 16 and older. Sidelinger acknowledged that even if the governor continued to mandate masks for unvaccinated people, it might not do any good.

"Even a requirement," Sidelinger said, "isn't necessarily going to get people to wear masks."

Sidelinger's comments on June 11 make clear that the change, first announced by Brown last week, is expected to be permanent. Neither vaccinated nor unvaccinated people will be required to wear masks when Oregon hits the 70% threshold.

The issue of masks has often been divisive throughout the pandemic and, while shown to be effective at reducing transmission, has remained a

flashpoint for some.

According to a New York Times tracker, at least eight states — including New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois — that have reopened are still requiring unvaccinated people to wear masks indoors, based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those states also lifted mask mandates for vaccinated people, except in limited circumstances like in airplanes, because of the CDC guidance.

It's unclear if several other states that have yet to reopen will require face coverings for those who are unvaccinated, although California says it will.

Earlier on June 11, Brown fumbled as she tried to explain how her plan to allow unvaccinated Oregonians to go without masks in most indoor public spaces later this month follows the latest CDC recommendations.

"We have continued to follow science and data and worked very closely with our federal partners, including the CDC regarding masking guidelines," Brown said initially when defending her mask-free policy.

The CDC guidance for unvaccinated people says, in part: "Everyone 2 years and older should wear masks in public," and "Masks should be worn in addition to staying at least 6 feet apart, especially around people who don't live with you."

When asked why she wasn't planning to follow CDC guidance, Brown referred the question to Sidelinger.

"I would recommend that even when we reopen if you're not vaccinated you consider wearing a mask, consider limiting the activities that you take part in because you're not protected," Sidelinger said.

When asked again,



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A fan watches a girls basketball game at La Grande High School on May 20, 2021. As Oregon counts down the days until Gov. Kate Brown lifts coronavirus restrictions, one of the state's top health officials said Friday, June 11, it's highly unlikely mask requirements would return even in the event of outbreaks in counties with low vaccination rates.

Brown seemed to express hope that the CDC might change its mask recommendations in the next few weeks.

"We're waiting to see what the CDC guidelines are going to be as we reopen," Brown said. "We know that they are examining the guidelines for the education system. And I suspect they will be re-examining other masking guidelines. And we will continue to watch to see what the federal agencies, including the CDC do in this arena."

Brown went on to clarify that she was not backing away from her plan to lift most mask requirements for the unvaccinated. But then — adding to the confusion — she said she'd comply with the CDC's recommendations.

"Look, we're going to continue to follow CDC guidelines as we reopen," Brown said.

Brown's mixed messages come at a time when it appears COVID-19 might be regaining some ground in Oregon, about one month after Brown began lifting

bans on indoor dining and loosening other coronavirus prevention measures.

The number of new known infections had been tumbling from late April to late May. But for eight days so far in June, new cases have plateaued, averaging nearly 300 per day, while new modeling indicated that could again drop.

Like many national public health experts, Sidelinger, the state epidemiologist, believes the massive surges that have characterized the pandemic are likely a thing of the past. But he expects outbreaks in coming months — especially as highly contagious variants, including the Delta variant that was first detected in India, attempt to gain footholds and vaccination rates remain low in some areas of the state.

It's something Sidelinger said he anticipated because more people have been gathering in close proximity to each other and traveling. But he's monitoring the new trend closely.

"Certainly," Sidelinger said, "it's something that does concern me."

State proposes new stimulus payments for essential workers

Proposal would use \$450 million for essential worker bonus, incentives

By **MIKE ROGOWAY**
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers will consider a proposal to pay essential workers who stayed on the job through the pandemic up to \$2,000 in new stimulus payments and a separate \$1,200 payment to unemployed Oregonians who return to work in frontline jobs by fall.

Labor leaders and some Democratic lawmakers have been pushing to use money from the latest federal stimulus bill to reward essential workers for their work during COVID-19. The \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan that Congress approved in March authorizes states to spend some of their stimulus money to reward essential workers and get others back on the job. Oregon received \$2.6 billion in all.

A proposal being circulated Friday, June 11, by SEIU Local 503, the largest union representing Oregon state employees, would use \$450 million of the state's share of that stimulus money for the essential worker bonus and the back-to-work incentive.

Here's how each portion would work:

- The essential worker bonus would be \$2,000 for workers whose base pay was less than the state's average wage in 2019 (roughly \$26.50 an hour), or \$1,000 for workers earning more than the average but less

than 150% of it (around \$39.70 an hour). Workers making more than 150% of the state average would receive no bonus.

- Frontline workers who were unemployed during the pandemic but are back on the job for at least four weeks by Oct. 15 would receive \$1,200.

The proposed legislation lists 17 categories of eligible job categories, among them health care, law enforcement, education, agriculture, food, energy, transportation, communications, defense, residential shelter work and hygiene products and services.

Workers must have been within 6 feet of the public while on the job or cleaned public facilities. Those who worked remotely would not be eligible.

The legislation is sure to face intense competition for funding as lawmakers hash out budget priorities in the remaining weeks of the legislative session. But Democratic leaders, who control both legislative chambers, have indicated they are open to the idea.

"Legislators are prioritizing bills that help communities impacted by the pandemic. Essential workers are the people hit hardest," Ben Morris, SEIU spokesman, said in an email this week. "So we are hopeful that the essential worker pay proposal will be among the bills that get prioritized."

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Bill looks to prioritize marginalized student success in higher education

By **MEERAH POWELL**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon legislators are considering a bill that would create a task force focused on success for underrepresented college students.

House Bill 2590 is continuing to move through the Legislature this session. If the bill passes, a group of state lawmakers will be tasked with visiting postsecondary institutions across the state in order to meet with current, former and prospective students from underrepresented groups.

Those conversations are intended to help develop policy focused on student success — including academic success, as well as college affordability, food and housing needs and entry into the workforce after graduation.

Those underrepresented groups not only include students of color, but also students in the LGBTQ community, students from rural communities, low-income students and other groups.

That task force of Oregon lawmakers, which would be appointed by the Senate president and the speaker of

the House, would also meet with faculty, staff and community partners who support underrepresented students in their work.

Rep. Teresa Alonso León, D-Woodburn, is one of the bill's chief sponsors. She emphasized the bill's importance during a recent work session of the Joint Subcommittee on Education.

"This is a really great opportunity for us to reimagine and rethink about what post-secondary, higher ed can look like through the lens of students," Alonso León said.

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