

As mask mandates end, Oregon bucks trend with permanent rule

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Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — As states around the country lift COVID-19 restrictions, Oregon is poised to go the opposite direction — and many residents are fuming about it.

A top health official is considering indefinitely extending rules requiring masks and social distancing in all businesses in the state.

The proposal would keep the rules in place until they are “no longer necessary to address the effects of the pandemic in the workplace.”

Michael Wood, administrator of the state’s department of Occupational Safety and Health, said the move is necessary to address a technicality in state law that requires a “permanent” rule to keep current restrictions from expiring.

“We are not out of the woods yet,” he said.

But the idea has prompted a flood of angry responses, with everyone from parents to teachers to business owners and employees crying government overreach.

Wood’s agency received a record number of public comments, mostly critical, and nearly 60,000 residents signed a petition against the proposal.

Opponents also are upset government officials won’t say how low Oregon’s COVID-19 case numbers must go, or how many people would have to be vaccinated, to get the requirements lifted in a state that’s already had some of the nation’s strictest safety measures.

“When will masks be unnecessary? What scientific studies do these mandates rely on, particularly now that the vaccine is days away from being available to everyone?” said state Sen. Kim Thatcher, a Republican from Keizer, near the state’s capital. “Businesses have had to play ‘mask cop’ for the better part of a year now. They deserve some certainty on when they will no longer be threatened with fines.”

Wood said he is reviewing all the feedback

to see if changes are needed before he makes a final decision by May 4, when the current rules lapse.

Oregon, a blue state, has been among those with the country’s most stringent COVID-19 restrictions and now stands in contrast with much of the rest of the nation as vaccines become more widely available.

At least six states — Alabama, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota and Texas — have lifted mask mandates, and some never implemented them. In Texas, businesses reopened at 100% capacity last month.

In January, Virginia became the first in the nation to enact permanent COVID-19 workplace safety and health rules.

“While the end of this pandemic is finally in sight, the virus is still spreading — and now is not the time to let up on preventative measures,” Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam said following the announcement.

Besides mask and distancing requirements, Oregon’s proposal includes more arcane workplace rules regarding air flow, ventilation, employee notification in case of an outbreak, and sanitation protocols.

It dovetails with separate actions issued by Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, using a state of emergency declaration, requiring masks in public statewide — and even outside when 6 feet (1.83 meters) of distance can’t be maintained — and providing strict, county-by-county thresholds for business closures or reductions in capacity when case numbers rise above certain levels.

More than a third of Oregon’s counties are currently limited to indoor social gatherings of six people, and the maximum occupancy for indoor dining, indoor entertainment and gyms is 25% capacity or 50 people, whichever is less. And many schools are just now reopening after a year of online learning.

The workplace rule is “driven by the pandemic, and it will be repealed,” Wood said.

“But, it might not need

to go away at exactly the same time the State of Emergency is lifted,” he said, referring to Brown’s executive orders.

Amid pandemic frustration and deprivation, the issue has gained a lot of attention. A petition on change.org opposing the rule gained nearly 60,000 signatures and spread on social media, drawing even more interest to the proposal. More than 5,000 public comments were sent to the agency, smashing its previous record of 1,100.

“The majority of comments were simply hostile to the entire notion of COVID-19 restrictions,” Wood said. “The vast majority of comments were in the context of, ‘You never needed to do anything.’”

Justin Spaulding, a doctor at the Cataract & Laser Institute of Southern Oregon, is among those who raised concerns about the proposal in public comments.

“I do not understand these new guidelines for business. If we put these into effect we will only continue to blunt the recent drop in business,” he wrote. “We have a large subset of patients that are unwilling (or) hostile with the current guidelines, and making them permanent will only make it worse.”

For Thatcher, the GOP state lawmaker, the most concerning part is “OSHA’s lack of clarity” on when the rules will be lifted.

Officials said they have every intent to repeal the rule, and that decision will be made based on a complex mix of factors, including case counts, vaccination rates, case severity and advice from the Oregon Health Authority.

“It will be a complicated assessment when we do it, and I would say it is impossibly complicated to do in advance,” Wood said.

Cline is a corps member for The Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

PUBLIC NOTICE

FORM LB-1 NOTICE OF BUDGET HEARING

A public meeting of the Illinois Valley Rural Fire Protection District will be held on May 10, 2021 at 3:00 pm at 681 Caves Hwy., Cave Junction, Oregon. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2021 as approved by the Illinois Valley Rural Fire Protection District Budget Committee. A summary of the budget is presented below. A copy of the budget may be inspected or obtained at the Illinois Valley Fire District Administration building located at 681 Caves Hwy., Cave Junction Oregon, between the hours of 9:00 a.m and 4:00 p.m Mon-Thur. this budget is for an annual budget period. This budget was prepared on a basis of accounting that is the same as the preceding year.

Contact: Jamie Paul - Executive Administrator Telephone: 541-592-3159 Email: jamiepaul@ivfire.com

FINANCIAL SUMMARY - RESOURCES			
TOTAL OF ALL FUNDS	Actual Amount 2019 - 2020	Adopted Budget This Year 2020 - 2021	Approved Budget Next Year 2021 - 2022
Beginning Fund Balance/Net Working Capital	365,000	365,000	700,000
Fees, Licenses, Permits, Fines, Assessments & Other Service Charges	30,000	35,000	41,500
Federal, State and all Other Grants, Gifts, Allocations and Donations			
Revenue from Bonds and Other Debt			
Interfund Transfers / Internal Service Reimbursements			
All Other Resources Except Current Year Property Taxes	13,218	14,034	13,706
Current Year Property Taxes Estimated to be Received	1,480,029	1,541,310	1,808,888
Total Resources	1,888,247	1,955,344	2,564,094

FINANCIAL SUMMARY - REQUIREMENTS BY OBJECT CLASSIFICATION			
Personnel Services	1,158,424	1,283,151	1,528,247
Materials and Services	478,100	526,231	556,165
Capital Outlay	30,000	30,000	37,000
Debt Service	102,850	61,674	60,234
Interfund Transfers	5,000	5,000	5,000
Contingencies	30,000	20,000	40,000
Special Payments			
Unappropriated Ending Balance and Reserved for Future Expenditure	83,873	29,288	337,448
Total Requirements	1,888,247	1,955,344	2,564,094

FINANCIAL SUMMARY - REQUIREMENTS AND FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT EMPLOYEES (FTE) BY ORGANIZATIONAL UNIT OR PROGRAM *			
Name of Organizational Unit or Program			
FTE for that unit or program			
Fire Protection			
FTE	1,888,247	1,955,344	2,564,094
Total Requirements	1,888,247	1,955,344	2,564,094
Total FTE	11	11	11

STATEMENT OF CHANGES IN ACTIVITIES and SOURCES OF FINANCING *			

PROPERTY TAX LEVIES			
	Rate or Amount Imposed 2019 - 2020	Rate or Amount Imposed This Year 2020 - 2021	Rate or Amount Approved Next Year 2021 - 2022
Permanent Rate Levy (rate limit 1.8701 per \$1,000)	1.8701/\$1,000 of assessed	1.8701/\$1,000 of assessed	1.8701/\$1,000 of assessed
Local Option Levy	0.50/\$1,000 of assessed	0.50/\$1,000 of assessed	0.50/\$1,000 of assessed
Levy For General Obligation Bonds	195.650	147.726	147.847

STATEMENT OF INDEBTEDNESS		
LONG TERM DEBT	Estimated Debt Outstanding on July 1, 2019 - 2020	Estimated Debt Authorized, But Not Incurred on July 1
General Obligation Bonds	\$355,300	
Other Borrowings: Admin Bldg	\$425,176	
Other Borrowings: Rescue Engine	\$40,768	
Total	\$821,244	

* If more space is needed to complete any section of this form, insert lines (rows) on this sheet. You may delete blank lines.

150-504-073-2 (Rev. 02-14)

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