

College to require masks indoors

The Astorian

Clatsop Community College will require students to wear masks in college buildings regardless of their vaccination status beginning Monday to guard against the spread of the coronavirus.

College leadership, citing an abrupt increase in local coronavirus cases and the fact that only 55% of Clatsop County residents are vaccinated, said Thursday it would follow guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Oregon Health Authority.

The potential to spread the virus “is a concern that could have effects on the college’s ability to keep offices and classrooms open and in-person,” college representatives wrote in a letter to students.

In addition to wearing masks while in campus buildings, college leaders asked students to social distance where possible, use hand-sanitizing stations at the college and consider getting vaccinated.

Masks: Virus cases increase across the state

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The guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Oregon Health Authority was greeted with frustration at many businesses that have adjusted to restrictions over the past year and a half.

State Rep. Suzanne Weber, R-Tillamook, said she would support a return to mask mandates if it would stop the spread of the virus, despite hearing from some angry constituents who say they will “never put on a mask again.”

Grocery stores like Fred Meyer recommend masks, but have not enforced it as a policy since statewide restrictions were dropped at the end of June. The decision is left up to customers.

Mark Hails, a shopper at Fred Meyer, said he was quick to pick up a mask after seeing the news about the new federal and state guidance. To him, it wasn’t a difficult choice.

“Put simply,” he said of the virus, “I just don’t want it.”

People who continue to shop without masks say it’s a choice they should have had all along. A few shoppers expressed frustration that they were told to get a vaccine to avoid going back to wearing masks, but are now being urged to do so.

Matt Stanley, the general manager at the Astoria Co-op, said he feels the government recommendations put businesses in a difficult spot.

“We’re going to be watching for any actual rule changes, not just recommendations,” Stanley said. “If OHA says, ‘Hey, you have to have masks at your business,’ then we will be inclined to requiring masks. But until that happens, we’re just kind of watching every day as this goes on.”

Stanley said enforcing



Griffin Reilly/The Astorian

A sign at Fred Meyer in Warrenton greets customers with the reminder that masks aren’t mandatory.

what the state is going to want to do or whether we’re going to need to go back to restrictions,” he said. “We have all along advised people to be prepared for returning to some level of restriction, but that has not been an active campaign yet.”

The new guidance on masks comes as virus cases increase across the state. Earlier in the week, Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state’s epidemiologist and health officer, said the delta variant is tied to an estimated 80% of new cases.

Clatsop County recorded 13 new virus cases on Friday and 18 new cases on Thursday, part of a jump of dozens of new cases over the past several weeks.

The county Public Health Department advises that everyone, vaccinated or not, mask up.

“It’s not a requirement, but it’s a recommendation,” Margo Lulich, the county’s interim public health director, said Wednesday at a county Board of Commissioners work session.

Most of the new virus cases in the county involve people who are unvaccinated,

mirroring state and federal patterns.

The county has been offering people who have caught the virus the chance to get vaccinated once the waiting period has passed. “What our experience has been is that many who are testing positive still do not want to get vaccinated,” Lulich said.

As a City Council work session in Cannon Beach drew to a close Wednesday night, city councilors briefly talked about masks, wondering if another mandate could be coming.

Mayor Sam Steidel mentioned that a number of people visiting his art gallery recently were all masked, a change from what he had been seeing in the weeks since the state’s mask mandate lifted. Other councilors said they were seeing more people wearing masks at the grocery store.

The city erected signs last year ahead of highway entrances and in the city to remind people to wear masks. The signs featured illustrations of rabbits, deer, elk and puffins, all wearing masks.

The city took the signs down after Gov. Kate Brown lifted restrictions at the end of June. But they’re stacked in City Manager Bruce St. Denis’ office, ready, he said, if they need to be used again.

Erick Bengel and Katie Frankowicz contributed to this report.

“It just sort of flips the script now the other way,” Hoppes told The Astorian.

Now, he said, “The district will review the rules that come out for the requirement and if it’s required we’ll have to follow it.”

The school board was split in its decision about masks. Board members Grace Laman and Heidi Wintermute wanted masks to continue to be required, following the advice of health experts.

The rest of the board wanted to make masks optional for everyone, though masks would still be required on school buses, a federal rule. They also pointed to the science, noting the low instances of spread of the virus among younger children, the availability of vaccines for children 12 and older and the likelihood that vaccinations for even younger children could be coming soon.

With the governor’s announcement, the school board is back on familiar ground: Responding to ever-shifting recommendations and rules.

“With all things COVID, when you think you’ve got it figured out ...” Jimmy Pearson, the school board chairman, said.

Pearson had voted in favor of letting masks be a choice, stating his confidence in the vaccines, a confidence he still maintains.

Masks will be back on the school board’s agenda at its Aug. 11 meeting, and will likely continue to be on meeting agendas going forward.

Other schools in Clatsop County had yet to finalize whether they would require masks after the state released updated guidelines last week. At the time, the state had recommended, but not required, masks in schools.

Food tax: ‘Rentals are being sold’

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The proposed 5% food tax was pitched as a way to spread the costs of running the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District and funding city infrastructure projects between visitors and residents.

Proponents argue the tax would have little impact on businesses and be a boon to the city overall. The service industry has pushed back, saying the tax could hurt businesses as they continue to weather restrictions and challenges tied to the coronavirus pandemic.

The City Council considered passing the measure themselves, but decided to put the matter to voters. If the measure passes, Reckmann expects the fire district will see around \$800,000 annually from the tax.

Housing for volunteer firefighters is not the first priority if the tax passes. The fire district would look to hire a fire marshal and finalize a contract with Medix for local ambulance services. But it’s up near the top.

Volunteers are the backbone of the fire district, which only has three paid employees. A number of them are in precarious living situations. Only three own homes in Cannon Beach.

“Everyone else rents and those rentals are being sold,” Reckmann said.

He has one volunteer who is between housing and is temporarily living at the station. Another volunteer was living in an attic until recently.

Housing has been a dominant policy issue on the North Coast for the past several years.

The housing market picked up last year despite the pandemic. It has yet to slow, both in urban places like Portland and on the North Coast, where the market value for some homes has more than doubled. In Astoria, a house that sold last year for \$145,000 was listed for more than half a million dollars this year. In Cannon Beach, where housing has often been especially expensive, buying a home is out of reach for many who work in the town.

Across Clatsop County, workforce-priced and affordable housing remains limited.

Reckmann himself bought a house in Seaside because he couldn’t afford to buy in Cannon Beach. He’s on the south side of Seaside, within 15 minutes from Cannon Beach, but it’s a situation that hampers response time and, in his opinion, sends a bad message.

The fact that some of the food tax revenue could go to housing for volunteer firefighters has not been widely known. City Councilor Robin Risley asked for more information at a city work session Wednesday.

Reckmann said that while it is a priority, it is not something that would happen immediately.

In the first year, much of the fire district’s share of the tax revenue would likely go to paying for the fire marshal and the contract with Medix. A portion would also go back to businesses to help cover the initial costs of implementing the tax.

But, by the second or third year, Reckmann would hope to have a conversation about the fire district buying or renting housing in Cannon Beach for volunteers.

He already plans to talk with the fire district board in August about continuing to rent a small home the district had reserved for the fire chief and offer it to volunteers instead. The house proved too small for Reckmann, his wife and their three children, but the money for the house has already been budgeted.

The fire district needs to retain volunteers, Reckmann told the City Council — a challenge as call levels remain high and volunteers face burnout.

Since September 2020, the fire district has broken call records every month with the exception of December and March, when the call load hit average levels. At the same time, a labor shortage seen across multiple industries nationwide is also affecting Cannon Beach’s volunteer firefighters.

All of Reckmann’s volunteers have other jobs or own their own businesses. With the labor shortage, many are working longer hours or more frequent hours and have less time to give. On recent calls, some volunteers were stuck at work.

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