

Fears linger as masks come off on COVID's second anniversary

By SUZANNE ROIG
The Bulletin

BEND — The identity of the first person to test positive for COVID-19 in Central Oregon will likely never be revealed, but the turning point that case created two years ago will always be etched into the history of the region.

Thousands of people would be diagnosed in Central Oregon with the “novel coronavirus,” the term used before the world became familiar with the word pandemic. More than 411 people would die in Central Oregon from the pandemic declared on this day as well by the World Health Organization.

And the fear of the coronavirus, justified or not, lurked everywhere: at roped off neighborhood playgrounds, on the groceries that came home, in the air you breathed when you went for a walk.

The second anniversary of COVID-19 in the region will pass Friday and with it, the masks that reminded everyone that the pandemic was everywhere. At 11:59 p.m. Friday the state's indoor mask mandate will be lifted.

Whether or not the community will breathe easier remains to be seen.

“We have been through so many surprises,” said Chunhui Chi, Oregon State University director of the Center for Global Health. “The virus won't disappear. It will be with us for a long time. We hope that the current omicron variant will remain the dominant strain for a long time so we can get a handle on that.”

“The mask mandate lifting is the first step in the transition to a post-pandemic world.”

In all, COVID-19 has claimed the lives of more than 6 million people worldwide and 6,800 in Oregon.

Early on, Chi predicted that residents should brace for a long haul. But even he did not predict the state of COVID-19 two years later.

“I anticipated a year, not two,” Chi said. “I expect now that by this summer we'll be in full blown transition from a pandemic to post pandemic.”

In the beginning, when the medical world did not have a concentrated effort to prevent the virus from spreading, medical personnel at St. Charles Bend battled the fast-spreading virus and the anxiety that came with feeling powerless to stop it.

“We're still in deep trouble,” said Dr. Doug Merrill, St. Charles Health System chief medical officer. “Caregivers have had high anxiety since March of 2020. It's been difficult for health care workers all along the way.”

Mask mandates still are required in medical facilities and on public transportation. Still, some see the lifting as a signal that perhaps life can return to pre-pandemic ways.

“For some this will feel like we're done with having to practice some level of protection against the pandemic,” said Rachel Gerken, Mosaic Medical director of behavioral health. “I feel like we're going down a road that it is more like normal.”

Only four of the state's 36 counties are in the high risk category, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The bulk of the state is in



Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin, File

Dr. George Conway, health services director for Deschutes County, announces the first presumptive case of COVID-19 in the county during a press conference in the Deschutes Services Building on March 11, 2020.

medium risk, which is determined by looking at hospital beds being used, hospital admissions, and the total number of new COVID-19 cases in an area, according to the CDC.

Dr. Nathan Ansbauh, who works at the St. Charles Bend Emergency Department, said his emotions are jumbled.

“Early on, none of us hesitated to take risks or make sacrifices because we were watching our neighbors and our community do the same,” said Ansbauh, who also holds degrees in public health and epidemiology. “People were home, out of work, out of school, away from family, from friends, losing money, losing their jobs, all with the notion that the sacrifices were worth keeping our community safe.”

But the pandemic wore him down, wore everyone down.

“As weeks, however, became months and those months, now years, it seems at times that this sense of unity is a distant memory,” he said.

St. Charles reported that 333 people have died within its walls of COVID-19. The staff who cared for those patients bears the loss from each of those deaths, Ansbauh said.

“The mortality numbers that people see are not just numbers to us,” he said. “They are memories of Herculean, yet failed, efforts to keep someone alive, of providing the horrible news to families that we did our best but could not save their loved one.”

The community should not assume the pandemic is over, said Erik Breon, Deschutes County Health Services spokesman. Those who are immune-compromised and elderly might consider keeping their masks on indoors, he said.

“People should assess their own health and take precautions,” Breon said. “We should remember that another variant or surge may develop. People need to make good personal choices to protect their families and neighbors.”

Removing mask mandates for indoors is a symbolic step in moving through the health crisis, Gerken said.

“It will be lovely to see people's faces again,” Gerken said. “I'm ready to take the mask off and engage in the world again.”

Local businesses switch gears as Oregon drops indoor mask mandate

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A major change is coming to businesses across Oregon.

In the wake of COVID-19 rates showing a steady decline in recent months, the state is set to end its statewide indoor mask mandate on Saturday, March 12. Local businesses will be required to shift gears again with the upcoming change but for the most part they see it as a positive development.

“I think a lot of customers are going to be really happy with the ability to choose for themselves,” said Liberty O'Dell, manager of La Grande Liquor and Smoke Shoppe. “That will probably spur more business.”

Businesses have perhaps been most impacted by the indoor mask mandate passed down from the state government. As of March 12, businesses will be able to decide for themselves whether people are required to wear masks while indoors at their establishments.

Masks off

La Grande Liquor and Smoke Shoppe faced not only a statewide mandate but requirements from the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission.

“As an agent of the state liquor commission, we have an agreement with them that we'll follow what they ask us to do with their liquor,” O'Dell said. “We hold that agreement to be mutually beneficial, so when they ask us to do something we follow through with that.”

The local store will now stop policing mask usage by customers on the premises, but leave the decision up to employees whether they want to continue wearing a face mask. According to O'Dell, the store encourages customers to continue to wear masks if they choose.

“If people still feel uncomfortable about their safety, they can wear a mask,” he said. “We did get quite a few people who were thankful we were requiring masks, but we also got way more vocal people who were against the mask mandate.”

HQ, a performance venue in downtown La Grande, recently announced upcoming in-person events as COVID-19 numbers decline. The venue is resuming its weekly open mic night on Thursdays, and the owners are beginning to schedule concert events for the spring. Chris Jennings, the venue's co-owner, noted that HQ will abide by the update to the mask mandate while trusting in attendees to make responsible decisions.

“If you still want to bring your mask because that's comfortable, that's fine,” Jennings said. “We're at that point where people need to start taking care of each other and be conscientious, while still enjoying those

things that keep us sane.”

HQ does not plan to require mask usage at concerts, but will update its policies if any changes occur in the future.

“I'm hoping that everyone has a vaccine or at least has taken the steps to protect themselves and others, not coming to the shows if they're sick and those types of things,” Jennings said. “I'm relying on some sound-minded judgment calls by people that care about each other and want to get together.”

Bella Mercantile on Adams Avenue was stout in their enforcement of mask usage during the mandate, but will refrain from enforcing masks in its La Grande location moving forward. Manager Erin Pierce said that business has stayed steady during the last two years, with the store experiencing one of its most successful years in 2021.

Pierce noted that a sizable portion of local customers were drawn to the store because of its mask enforcement.

“I think that the bigger effect is going to be on the people who came to our store because we still required the masks, feeling safe coming here,” Pierce said. “We're just going to reassure them that we can still do curbside service and deliver and take precautions.”

Market Place Fresh Foods in La Grande is following a similar model, encouraging customers to be conscientious. Owner Marco Rennie noted that employees and customers will not be required to wear masks, but that each person can choose to do what they feel is appropriate.

“If people still feel the need, then we encourage them to wear a mask when they come in,” Rennie said. “Many people have gotten their vaccines and have the antibodies. People who are still concerned I think should continue to wear the masks.”

Employee burden

One common theme among local businesses was fatigue among employees, who were tasked with policing the mandate.

“I think everybody is going to be really appreciative of not having to enforce it,” O'Dell said. “I feel like that burden was put on essential workers to enforce this mask mandate. It added to the essential workers' burden of responsibility.”

Tasked with labor shortages and supply chain issues, employees policing the mandate added to the stress of working during a pandemic.

“I think it will help take some of the pressure off employees,” Rennie said. “For them to be in a place where they have to police it is difficult.”

Bella's Pierce agreed: “I think there's going to be a sense of relief in not having to deal with any confrontation.”

As mask mandates lift, Oregon parents say they trust local schools

By ANNA DEL SAVIO
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Most parents in Oregon say educators have been keeping their kids safe during the COVID-19 pandemic as the state's mask mandate comes to an end.

While coronavirus outbreaks in schools haven't been a recent problem, just under half of parents said outbreaks in schools in their area had been a problem in the month prior to completing an early February survey. Meanwhile 64% of Oregon parents thought their area's K-12 schools were doing a good job keeping students safe

and minimizing the spread of COVID-19.

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center's survey, which was conducted before state officials announced that the mask mandate would end no later than March 31, found that 81% of Oregonians were at least somewhat concerned about hospitals being too short-staffed to treat all patients.

Susannah Krug, who has three school-age children, said she was nervous about the end of the mask mandate.

“I'm glad about it ending for children, since I didn't think it was fair they were carrying the burden of our failure

to control the spread,” Krug said.

But Krug, a North Plains resident whose job involves daily face-to-face interactions with different people, said she'll likely continue wearing a mask.

Krug said her three children — an elementary schooler, middle schooler and high schooler in Hillsboro public schools — have never loved wearing masks.

“But now that the prospect is on the table that they can take them off, possibly next week, they're not thrilled about that idea,” Krug said. “(They) just feel really cautious about it.”

Both Krug and Aimee Wood, a parent of two Tigard-Tualatin School District students, said they had told their kids that they could decide whether to continue masking or not. But Wood said she doubts her family will continue wearing masks — unless a new variant comes or case numbers start to rise.

“They've been wearing masks, which I supported when the case numbers were high, but based on where the numbers are right now in Oregon and our county, I think it makes sense to remove them,” Wood said.

Liberals were four times more likely than conservatives

to say they were “very concerned” with hospitals in their region not having enough beds for everyone requiring hospitalization.

As of March 10, Northwest Oregon had 276 adult ICU beds occupied and 46 beds open.

As of last week there were 300 COVID-19 patients hospitalized across Oregon, with 55 in ICUs.

Wood said she wasn't at all concerned with hospital capacity as of early March, but had been at previous points over the past two years, like last August and September when the delta variant was surging.

Bryan Hadley, a Medford resident with only his youngest child still in school, said he was glad the mask mandate was ending but wished it had ended sooner.

“I feel it's about time,” Hadley said. “My personal opinions are that we should have our own choice whether to mask up, that's totally fine. And if they don't, that's totally fine.”

Hadley also has an older child at home who is at high risk for a more serious case of COVID-19, so he said his family has been cautious about that and was previously more concerned about hospital capacity.

Daily new COVID-19 cases and the test positivity rate have dropped since January, the most recent surge, with fewer than 500 cases per day, as of the week of March 11.

Those numbers represent a steep drop from the first weeks of 2022, when an average of more than 7,700 cases were reported each day.

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