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FEATURED

## Brattleboro requires masking again, encourages vaccinations

By Chris Mays, Brattleboro Reformer  
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Lynn Valente, from Marlboro, Vt., walks down Main Street, in Brattleboro, Vt., while wearing a mask on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021.

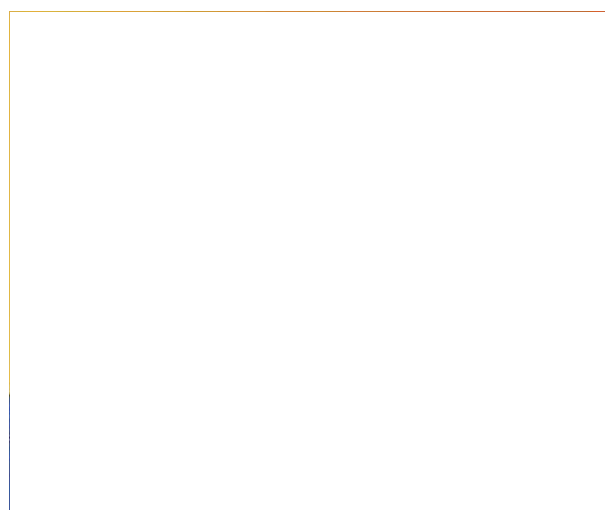
Kristopher Radder — Brattleboro Reformer



BRATTLEBORO — Select Board members adopted in a 4-1 vote a resolution mandating masks be worn by everyone in public indoor spaces, a move that will need to be approved by Vermont Health Commissioner Mark Levine.

At a meeting Tuesday, the board also unanimously approved a separate resolution encouraging mask wearing and vaccinations against COVID-19. The board plans to review the resolutions at its meetings, which are held the first and third Tuesdays of each month.

In June, the board voted to lift a mask mandate for vaccinated people in indoor public spaces. Then, board members spoke about not wanting confusion as state and federal guidance changed with the vaccination efforts underway.



Windham County was considered to have “substantial” levels of community transmission of the virus last week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, prompting the matter of adopting a mask mandate to be brought back on the table. The CDC says people should be wearing masks indoors in public in areas with “substantial” or “high” levels of transmission.

Just before Tuesday’s meeting, the county went back to “moderate” levels.

Elwell said he and Town Attorney Bob Fisher found the board still has authority to require masks indoors but not as “unilaterally” since there is no longer a state of emergency in Vermont. As the town’s Board of Health, the Select Board can make or enforce in town relating to the prevention and removal of public health risks. The more forceful resolution would require approval from the state health commissioner.

The number of cases are increasing dramatically in Vermont, Elwell said. Last week, cases rose by 41 percent in Vermont and about 50 percent in Windham County.

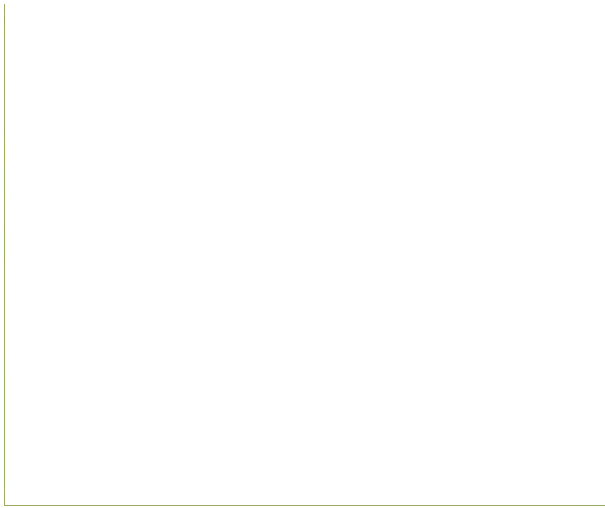
Capacity is not an issue at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital currently, Elwell said.

“Hospitalization rates are not a factor for us here in Brattleboro and Windham County at this time,” he said.

Board member Daniel Quipp worried a resolution tied to CDC designations could further confuse people but supported recommending universal masking.

At the time of the meeting, he said Windham County had about 45 cases per 100,000 people. Going up to 50 would bring the county to “substantial” levels of transmission.

“It’s not just going to go away,” board member Jessica Gelter said. “I know that a mandate by the town when unenforced may feel useless to some folks but I think it’s the strongest statement that we can make that we want people to pay attention to these guidelines coming from the CDC, guidelines coming from science.”



Board member Tim Wessel said the Delta variant is “scary and sometimes the media doesn’t help sometimes ... but there’s no solid evidence it’s more dangerous.”

“There’s more people getting it,” he said.

Wessel supported a resolution encouraging mask wearing and vaccination, feeling the lack of enforcement of a mandate would leave the burden up to businesses. He noted Vermont is the most vaccinated state in the U.S.

Board Chairwoman Elizabeth McLoughlin called the trajectory of cases “alarming.”

“I would hope that we can act in one way or another to indicate the concern to encourage people to be vaccinated and while that is going on, keep people safe because I’m very worried about the fall and winter,” she said. “And when people move inside, what’s going to happen?”

Asking businesses to enforce a mandate without state backing puts them in an “uncomfortable position,” said Tracey John, general manager of Vermont Country Deli.

“Having to take this on makes me very anxious,” she said.

Shea Witzberger of Brattleboro said for the vulnerable, it is not comfortable to go into public not knowing the vaccination status of those not wearing masks.

Nanci Bern, an employee at a local nonprofit, supported a mandate but acknowledged the difficulty of not having an enforcement mechanism from the town. Art “Fhar” Miess, who works downtown, also supported a mandate.

Andrea Watkins of Brattleboro said the community borders counties with higher levels of transmission, which should be taken into account when making a decision.

Assistant Town Manager Patrick Moreland counted about 13 people attending the meeting via Zoom teleconferencing software. No members of the public were at the in-person meeting.

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## Chris Mays

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Chris Mays is a general assignment reporter for the Brattleboro Reformer. He has been with New England Newspapers Inc. since 2012.

