

**Meeting Notes from the Special Meeting of the Peabody Board of Health,
Held via Zoom on December 22, 2021 @ 4:00 p.m.**

In Attendance: Chairperson Thomas J. Durkin III, Member Dr. Julia Fleet, Member Anthony Carli,
Health Department Director Sharon Cameron, and Recording Secretary Lisa Greene
The meeting was held remotely Via Zoom at 4:00 p.m.

Subject: Meeting called to order

Discussion: Mr. Durkin called the roll of Board members to establish who was present via this remote meeting and all were in attendance. He called the special meeting to order at 4:01 p.m. and told that the meeting is being held to discuss a possible temporary mask mandate for the City of Peabody. Mr. Carli, Dr. Fleet and Mr. Durkin were all present via zoom. Mr. Durkin asked Ms. Cameron to give a presentation of data.

Ms. Cameron reported that as of Monday we have had 10,362 Covid cases in Peabody since the pandemic began. There is concern over the recent increase in case count, with 611 recent new cases, or 78 cases per 100,000 residents per day, which is a significant increase over a few days ago. Percent positivity has been also increasing, and we are now at 7 ½% positivity. Ms. Cameron showed a graph of daily cases, showing a 1st, 2nd and now a 3rd surge of cases. The 14- day incidence rate shows 78 new cases per 100,000 residents per day, and this number has not been so high since last February. The 7-day incidence rate shows 77 new cases per 100,000 residents per day, signaling an increase, and she showed trends across the state, which show the same trend, but Peabody numbers are higher. She said in the past, that the State was using 5% positivity as the metric for being concerned, and we are at 7%. Peabody deaths: as of today have had 351 deaths in Peabody, and the majority, 72%, were in the older population, but we have had deaths in every age group. In the beginning, the vast majority, 65% deaths, were in nursing home patients, with 35% in broader community. Now only 5% of cases are in nursing homes and the other 95% are in the broader community. State numbers: hospitalizations chart shows three peaks, the same overall trend, and we are seeing a significant recent increase in the number of hospitalizations. Hospital bed usage in northeastern mass showed over 97% of medical surgical beds were occupied, and ICU beds were also 97% occupied. In a recent meeting, the chief operating officer of Lahey Health System said that he was gravely concerned about the capacity of the hospital system, and of increase in hospital usage from the new variant. She said that he told them on the recent meeting that he thinks that communities should do anything they can to help prevent the spread, including mandating indoor masking in public places. She told that in another meeting with leaders from Salem Hospital they said the same. She said that it is reasonable to put in place an indoor masking mandate regionally to help mitigate these impacts, and that the state health dept has informed us that there is a great concern about omicron. She said that last week, omicron represented 9% of cases, and this week omicron represented 65% of all cases in MA, and in a few days is projected to represent 95% of all cases. Since we have a new variant which is highly transmissible, we feel it is appropriate to put additional mitigation strategies into place.

Mr. Durkin asked the board if they had any questions or comments. None were put forth. Mr. Durkin said that the current numbers are very concerning. He said that we, the board, are relying on the data and following the trends, the criticality of the numbers. He said that he has been and continues to be open to comments from citizens and from medical professionals, but he's leaning toward a temporary indoor mask mandate being put in place. He added that this meeting is not actually a hearing, but he said that he feels that it is the appropriate thing to do to hear what people have to say about this.

Mr. Durkin first asked if there were any city officials on the call who want to speak on this matter. Mayor Bettencourt indicated he would like to speak. Mr. Durkin welcomed the Mayor. Mayor Bettencourt thanked the Board and the Health Department for all of their efforts. He went on to say that dark days continue, but he is very grateful for their assistance and support during this Covid pandemic. He said that he was also present on the call with the representative from Lahey, and feels that the statistics were very concerning, including the hospitalization data and trends, and he said that he had hoped that we would be beyond all this by now, but unfortunately we are not. He said that he understands Lahey's concern about beds and about dealing with emergencies in general and added that we as a city need to support them. He stated that he is in favor of a temporary indoor mask mandate, adding that he believes that we need to take this step in order to keep our community as safe as we can. He went on to say that the current case numbers and the concerning information coming from the hospitals warrant this. He added that it is unfortunate and is not what he wanted to see happening, but we have no real choice. He added that he is not in favor of a vaccine mandate. Mr. Durkin thanked Mayor Bettencourt for his leadership and for speaking to the board.

Mr. Durkin then said that they would allow comments from the public. He asked that everyone please keep their comments brief and to the point.

(participants are listed by name they provided on the zoom meeting)

Deena: Regarding Lahey bed capacity, are they at capacity because of Covid or because of a nursing shortage? Mr. Durkin replied that we don't know the reason for the situation. She stated she is against forcing people to wear their masks. If people cared for masks correctly she would feel better, but the health of masks is bugging her.

John: What are the neighboring communities doing, like Beverly and Danvers? It's not like it was at the beginning of Covid. People have had it with masks. I deal with the public and know that people will go somewhere else rather than wear a mask. People can be nasty, which puts us in an awkward position.

Jerry: I support the move toward a mask mandate. Frankly I wish we had done it weeks ago to prevent this near-disaster in the hospitals. We have over 7% positivity, and within the next few days and month there will be a lot of new cases, and omicron is very good at spreading, so we could have an overwhelming onslaught of sick people rushing to the hospital. Peabody can take the lead and our leadership can save lives.

Effie Wilkins R.N.: Hospital bed shortage is related to nursing shortage, since many nurses were fired and let go from Lahey and Partners over vaccination requirements. Also the slides that were shown referenced the fact that cases have increased, but doesn't show people who are actually sick. People who want to wear masks will wear them, those who do not will not. A mandate is a complete overreach. Also omicron, while it might be more transmissible, the symptoms are very mild so why are you making a big deal, it's like the flu, and masks are not going to make this go away, and I hate to see it if every Christmas we will have mask mandates.

Cody: I agree with last person, I'm against a mask mandate, it is unattractive for Peabody if other communities are not requiring it, and people will go someplace else. Also what is the percent of cases being spread from local businesses, can we look at that kind of data, does it show that we actually need a mask indoors? Everyone seems well versed in Covid, where I can go, how I can stay safer, if you want to come out, come and wear a mask. A statewide mandate is ok, but not town by town, it is too inconsistent.

Mary: I have a great opposition to the mandate. You said we're reaching the peaks from last year, we wore them last year, it didn't do a lot, we were told that masks are not good, then they were, also people wear them too loose. If you want to wear one go ahead. Look at any scientific research, I have 1% chance of stopping the spread with masks, is it worth imposing on your citizens? Are you

looking at the science or just following along? Masks hold nothing in, and keep out oxygen. I would like to hear back. I want scientific data, not just this city doing it, this is just fear mongering, I did research, this is ridiculous.

David Gamache: I have received a few phone calls from ward 5 businesses who are against a mask mandate. I agree with the nurse who spoke earlier, and I think people are doing a lot of tests which is why numbers are up, and the issue of masks should be up to individuals. I wear a mask in crowded stores. I don't know the severity of omicron, but in my opinion it would be best to not mandate, but make sure information is out there, and wait until Beverly and Danvers issue mandate too. This could hurt businesses, hurt the mall, we have people coming in from all over. Hospitalizations are up, but shame on people who are not vaccinated taking up the beds. People who got shots should have the right to go in and shop and not wear masks. This is not good for business, city should not go with a mandate.

David Cutler: I'm a business owner and resident, thanks for allowing me to speak. It is scary that hospitals are at capacity. I think a blanket mask mandate is ineffective, and there are several other things we could do to be a leader and be smart. People who want to wear masks should, and people should be educated on how to wear masks properly. They take them on and off, with dirty hands, the types used are not proper, so it's not smart to continue. You can make proper masks available for free, n95s, effective way to curb spread, mask education in schools and nursing homes, etc. Many not wearing them properly, we need mask education, we need better air circulation.

Maureen: According to your data, 276 people showed no symptoms and 94 people were symptomatic. Less than .7% of population is positive and .2 had symptoms, only 3% hospitalized, 0.85% unclear comorbidities or if in hospital for something else. Most beds are non-Covid cases. Numbers are less than the flu, and we don't have mask mandate during flu season, so why require masks if this is the case. This is overstepping and I hope the board will consider the Peabody numbers and not infringe on people's rights which are protected.

Tara: I wanted to voice my support for the mask mandate. My business has a mask mandate, but a baseline mandate will support businesses like mine to help us to enforce our requirement.

Jerry: I understand that people have objections and concerns, but I think the job of public health is just that- you have to think of the health of the public. Just a few individuals can harm other people, and they don't have the right to do that. It is our responsibility as a city and society to protect each other. Masks are an extra layer of protection, and if everyone wears them, the spread will be reduced or stopped.

Robert: I'm a business owner in town. The government shut us down 15 months, and we've been back open for 6 months. We've done everything, the cleaning, the filtrations systems. I have over 50 employees, we've not one had a case in our business. We are doing everything, to force a mask on every employee and staff person- they will probably quit, forcing people to go to another surrounding town. As others have said, people have the right to make their own decisions.

Adam Drohan: I'm a business owner and resident, have lived in Peabody all my life, thanks for this opportunity to speak. Thank you, Mayor, for not supporting a vaccine mandate. People are wearing masks incorrectly, no one is using them correctly. To tell people in a restaurant to put on a mask to walk 4 feet then they can take it off to sit down makes the guests angry. Allow some establishments who choose to require masks, some do, so let people do what they decide. Somerville put in place a strong mandate. It is not passing between people. This is pandemic theater. I hope this doesn't happen.

Amy: I am in favor of masking. While some find it to be inconvenient, some say it is worth it for the public good. My background is in microbiology. In Asia, in Taiwan, in the very beginning, before vaccines everyone actually wore masks. Their cases were very low, just due to masking. Especially if hospitals are short of staff, it is a very simple gesture that will help ease the current situation.

Mr. Durkin asked if there were any other comments. None were put forth. Mr. Durkin thanked everyone for their comments. Mr. Carli made a motion to close public comment portion. Dr. Fleet seconded, a vote was taken and it was unanimously agreed to close public comments portion of the meeting at 4:50.

Mr. Durkin said he is considering what he heard from commenters today but said that he is still inclined to support the mask mandate. The trend is concerning, the transmissibility of the omicron variant is frightening, and it is early in the science, but it is not prudent to wait, since what we do know is concerning enough. He added that he would like to validate the comments that said a regional approach would be better, but unfortunately that is not the case right now. He added that he is sensitive to the business needs of the city, which are very important, and he takes great pause before implementing something that may hurt the business community. Just because some do not wear masks properly is not a good enough reason to not do a temporary indoor mask mandate.

Dr Fleet agreed and said that we need a mandate and need it now. This virus spreads very fast, and acting now is very important especially given the reduced capacity of the hospitals. 95% of cases in Peabody are community spread and not in nursing homes, which is especially important given that people are gathering and shopping again. People mentioned how inconvenient masks are, and there is pandemic fatigue, and she understands that. She added that personally she does not find it that inconvenient. She said she doesn't know how much of a deterrent it will be to people going into businesses, and she is not convinced it will keep people from patronizing them. Given the alarming hospitalization numbers, we need to act. She also agreed that we should not mandate vaccination for entry to Peabody businesses.

Mr. Carli said that we have been watching the data and trends and now see the increases and have to act. He said he feels for the businesses who are concerned, and for people who got vaccinated, and now they are being expected to do more, and that's unfortunate, but it is too concerning, from a hospitalization standpoint. While we hope that Beverly and Danvers will step up, since we all agree that a regional approach is best, in the meantime we still need to take steps to do what is best for people in our city.

Mr. Durkin said that he has seen a draft of a temporary mandate, which states that the mandate would begin on Monday December 27th, which allows people some time to prepare to comply, and is fine with language as presented.

Mr. Carli made a motion to put in place the presented mask mandate which will begin on Dec. 27th. Dr. Fleet seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken, and all voted in favor of putting in place the temporary indoor mask mandate. Mr. Durkin thanked the public again for letting us hear your comments. He added that, without exception, all of the comments were thoughtful, helpful, and polite, which is always appreciated, so thank you for that. Mr. Durkin committed that the Board will review the temporary mandate at each upcoming meeting to determine whether it needs to remain in place. Dr. Fleet made a motion to adjourn, Mr. Carli seconded the motion. All voted in favor of adjournment.

Adjournment: 4:58 p.m.