

Board of Health
Meeting Minutes – Special Meeting
Remote Participation Conference Call
February 14, 2022

Present:

Anita Raj, Chair
Susan Schwartz, Vice Chair
Bea Brunkhorst
Ann Kiessling
Maureen Richichi

Staff Present:

Heidi Porter, Director of Health and
Human Services
Katharine Dagle, Assistant Health Director
Margaret Root, Recording Secretary

Others Present (based on Zoom ID):

Arlington COA
Joan Bowen, Bedford resident
Erica Callahan, Bedford resident
Anne Caron, 120 North Road
Erica Chaplin, Bedford resident
Christina Dean, Bedford resident
Danielle DiGangi, Bedford resident
Susan DiGangi, Bedford resident
Sarah Doody, Bedford resident
Jeff Dreyfus, Bedford resident
Melissa Farb, Bedford resident
Betsy Goetschius, Bedford resident
Rebecca Grossman, Bedford resident
Steve Hagan, Bedford resident
Doug Horton, Bedford resident
Kristin Hough, Bedford resident
Grace Induni, Bedford resident
Jane Karpovsky, Bedford resident
Jennifer Kennery, 43 Washington Street
Dawn Kociubes, Bedford resident
Mike Lynch, Bedford resident
John Mara, Bedford resident
Michaela McCormack, 55 Evergreen Avenue
Denis Mezheritskiy, Bedford resident
Marillian Missiti, Bedford resident
John Mitchell, 4 Heritage Drive
Jane Mosier, Bedford resident
Jane Patterson, 20 Paul Revere Road
Emily Prince, 66 South Road
Melanie Raposa, Bedford resident
Jim Rose, Bedford resident
Elena Rozzi Pellegrino, Bedford resident
Sarah Scoville, Bedford School Committee
Jennifer Smith-Foster, Bedford resident
Mark Sullivan, Bedford resident

Maria Borino, Bedford resident
Liz Briody, Bedford resident
Patty Carluccio, 16 Washington Street
Stacy Chandler, Bedford resident
Isabell Dalaklis, Bedford resident
Jeff Derderian, Bedford resident
David DiGangi, Bedford resident
Jennifer DiPasquale, Bedford resident
Robert Dorer, Bedford resident
Karen Dunn, Finance Committee
Kevin Finn, Bedford resident
Jason Gould, Bedford resident
Katie Guerino, Bedford resident
Teddy Hollman, Bedford resident
Kelly Horton, Bedford resident
Michael Indelicato, 6 Sorens Way
Robert Kalantari, 8 Donovan Drive
Evan Kelly, Bedford resident
Andy Kinch, Bedford resident
Sarah Lance, Bedford resident
Pastor Jonathan Manor, Bedford resident
Julie McCay Turner, Bedford resident
Sheila Mehta-Green, Bedford resident
Daria Miano, Bedford resident
Emily Mitchell, Bedford Select Board
Brad Morrison, Bedford resident
Loriann O'Brien, Bedford resident
Kevin Pollefoort, Bedford resident
Jenn Puhle, Bedford resident
Sanjay Raja, Bedford resident
Mike Rosenberg, Bedford Citizen
Sheena Santos, Bedford resident
Jeremy Singer, 8 Arbella Road
Robin Steele, Bedford resident
Dan Walsh, 8 Red Coat Road

Virginia Wang, 2 Avon Road
Angela Winter, 5 Great Road

Meredith Wasko, Bedford resident
Additional Unidentified Bedford residents

The meeting was called to order at 6:02 PM. Ms. Raj chaired. Dr. Brunkhorst moved to open the meeting. Ms. Richichi seconded the motion. A roll call vote of 5-0-0 opened the meeting.

Ms. Raj made a statement: “Pursuant to a bill signed into law by Governor Baker on June 16, 2021, continuing suspension of certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law through April 1, 2022, this meeting of the Bedford Board of Health will be conducted via remote participation. Persons who would like to listen or view this meeting while in progress may do so by Zoom or by phone. This meeting will also be recorded and the recording will be available on the Board of Health website alongside the minutes. All votes taken by this body shall be by roll call vote.”

Public Comment

Ms. Raj opened the meeting to any public comments. Ms. Raj clarified that the main reason for tonight’s meeting is to allow the BOH as a group to discuss DESE’s decision to lift the school mask mandate and if the BOH can come to a decision regarding Bedford’s town mask mandate. Ms. Raj added that a lot of information was submitted to the BOH from the public as well as the Health Department.

Ms. Emily Prince, 66 South Rd, spoke on behalf of 119 concerned residents who signed a petition over the past 24 hours to respectfully request the BOH continue the Town mask mandate through Monday, March 7, 2022, and re-evaluate at that time based on all available data from the week following winter break. Ms. Prince continued: “Presently, there is an assumption that current downward trends will continue. By waiting to render a decision on the mandate until March 7, the Board of Health can confidently affirm that the case rates, hospitalizations, and deaths associated with the Omicron surge continue to wane, and no post-Super Bowl, post-vacation case surges have occurred. Many students live in households with young children ineligible for vaccination, immunocompromised family members who are at risk of severe illness and it would be irresponsible to put them at additional risk. Furthermore, continuing the mask mandate will prevent extended school absences, and staffing shortages throughout the district should a post-vacation surge occur. As observed last year, continuity of in-person school is critical to the social-emotional well-being and academic success of students. To date, Bedford’s pandemic response has been guided by case rates, hospitalizations, and deaths. Cases and hospitalizations are rapidly declining throughout the Commonwealth, yet the case decline is lagging in Bedford. According to the Town Dashboard, Bedford’s 14-day positivity rate as of February 11, 2022, is 6.83%, whereas Middlesex County’s positivity rate is 4.62%. Given the impending vacation week, now is not the time to let down our guard. We urge the Board of Health to continue its measured, thoughtful, data-driven approach as we enter the next phase of the pandemic.”

Ms. Michaela McCormack, 55 Evergreen Avenue, commented that she also asks the BOH to keep the mask mandate in place for a couple more weeks. While the declining numbers are optimistic, Ms. McCormack commented that Bedford’s numbers remain relatively high compared to the region and are nowhere close to the numbers last spring when the positivity rate was less than 1% for several weeks. Both the CDC and the AAP have not changed their recommendations regarding masking in schools. Ms. McCormack added that many families believe removing the mask mandate in schools and the Town on February 28th is too soon. While people want to return to

normal, removing mask mandates prematurely could cause a major set-back. For families with vulnerable family members and children too young to get vaccinated, large changes in COVID-19 precautions are a source of great stress and concern. Children in these families have to attend school and many people are just starting to attend events in Town buildings or participate in indoor activities. Ms. McCormack commented that many were disappointed in DESE's decision to drop the mask mandate in schools and hope that the decision is reconsidered.

Ms. McCormack asked the BOH to consider maintaining the mask mandate, or to amend the mask mandate to cover schools as it was originally written in August. She also suggested removing the mask mandate in increments, such as keeping the mandate in Town buildings to protect children and the elderly visiting places such as the library or Council on Aging. After a couple more weeks, the data can be evaluated again.

Ms. McCormack also made a request for the BOH to work more closely with the School Committee and School administration in order to make a plan moving forward based on metrics such as vaccination rates and participation in the testing programs.

Ms. Jane Patterson, 20 Paul Revere Road, asked if the BOH could overrule Superintendent Conrad regarding the school mask mandate. Ms. Raj replied that the BOH has not done so and a discussion on the subject would be needed.

Ms. Patterson asked if Superintendent Conrad spoke with the BOH regarding the lifting of the school mask mandate. Ms. Raj replied that he would have been in contact with Ms. Porter as she is the Director of the Health and Human Services.

Ms. Porter added that the BOH has the opportunity to establish any rule or regulation that they feel is important to be in place to protect the public health of the community. Relative to COVID-19 response and the schools, the BOH and school actions have been aligned. The BOH can make something more strict, not less strict. If there is an emergency or emergent situation, where the data is pointing to a specific action that should be taken, the BOH can make a rule or regulation as they choose. The decision would need to be supported by the data and public health information.

Ms. Patterson asked if a larger town like Burlington had issues with COVID-19 cases, if their numbers were higher, would mask mandates be put back in place. Ms. Porter replied that she didn't know specific data for Burlington. Ms. Schwartz added that the BOH couldn't speak to another town's actions and decisions.

Ms. Patterson commented that children shouldn't be masked in schools as it has caused mental health and educational issues.

Ms. Anne Caron, 120 North Road, commented that she agrees with previous statements regarding keeping the mask mandate in place, particularly in the schools. She added that she is in favor of the BOH keeping the mask mandate in effect in the schools, if the BOH is able to do so. Ms. Caron continued by commenting that DESE is not a public health entity and does not speak for public health recommendations. DESE has acted against public health recommendations and not provided comments regarding their recommendations. Ms. Caron added that DESE's decision to remove the mask mandate on the 28th is due to people complaining that they are tired of masks and not from public health guidance. She asked that the Bedford BOH look at Bedford specific

metrics and decide what is best for Bedford. Possible metrics include vaccination rates, and participation in testing programs offered by the schools, which has been historically low. Ms. Caron suggested increasing the other mitigation actions, such as vaccination and testing, before removing masks. She also suggested keeping the mask mandate in place for at least one to two weeks after school vacation since a surge in cases is typically observed after vacations.

Mr. John Mitchell, 4 Heritage Drive, first thanked the BOH for their service over the past two years. Mr. Mitchell commented that he was not opposed to lifting the mask mandate in businesses and schools, and would leave the decision to the BOH. Mr. Mitchell then asked the BOH to consider leaving the mask mandate in place for large indoor public gatherings such as Town Meeting and the High School musical. There are other events such as indoor sports and the Middle School musical to also consider.

Mr. Mitchell commented that many families, including his own, have vulnerable members who shouldn't have to choose between attending an event and their health. He added that many of the performers would like to sing without masks, but wouldn't feel safe if the audience weren't wearing masks. Mr. Mitchell would like the BOH to mandate or to recommend to the Bedford Public Schools that spectators for the musical and sports must wear masks, regardless of the rules for performers and athletes.

Regarding Town Meeting, it was difficult to achieve quorum at the Special Town Meeting in November. It is a multi-generational event and all residents should feel welcome and safe to attend such an important meeting to discuss Bedford issues. Everyone should be able to attend, hear from fellow residents and Town officials, and vote. Masks are a reasonable precaution to allow citizens to participate. Mr. Mitchell asks the BOH to require masks, or to ask the Town Moderator to require universal masking at Town Meeting.

Ms. Angela Winter, 5 Great Road, commented that she is against the BOH adding the schools back under Bedford's mask mandate. Teachers and administrators have already begun preparing students for the change on the 28th when masks become optional in the schools. Ms. Winter commented that her children were thrilled with the news that they wouldn't have to wear their masks anymore in school. Ms. Winter added that the legality of the BOH overruling a DESE decision would have to be determined.

Ms. Winter commented that teachers are reporting an increase with students, especially the youngest students, having difficulty with phonetic awareness because of mask wearing. Students aren't able to properly form words and understand phonetics. Ms. Winter closed her comments with supporting the Bedford mask mandate ending with the school mask mandate.

Ms. Jennifer Kennerly, 43 Washington Street, commented that Bedford has done a wonderful job following DESE. Ms. Kennerly added that mental health is her biggest concern regarding young children. She supports the school mask mandate being lifted and doesn't want the BOH to overrule the decision.

Dr. Michael Indelicato, 6 Sorens Way, commented that he is a rheumatologist treating multiple people on immunosuppressants. It has been two years and now vaccines and boosters are available to almost everyone. Dr. Indelicato added that if people do not feel comfortable not wearing a mask, then they can choose to wear a mask, and vice versa. The data supports that most children

aren't severely affected by the virus. While children can be severely affected by COVID-19, they can also be severely affected by a number of things including the flu and riding the bus to school. Dr. Indelicato added that there are also treatments available now and a mask mandate is no longer necessary for children. Bedford should follow other towns, and the data should be followed.

Mr. Jeremy Singer, 8 Arbella Road, commented that vaccines help reduce the mortality if infected, and masks reduce infection. Masks are a public health measure. Regardless of age and vaccination status, there are breakthrough infections, and once infected, a person can spread the infection. Mr. Singer commented that case numbers should be looked at to determine when it is safe to unmask. Mr. Singer added that over 50% of people infected with COVID-19 experience long COVID symptoms and problems. This should be kept in mind as fatality isn't the only concern with this virus. Mr. Singer commented that he supports keeping the mask mandate in place until case numbers support removing the masks.

Mr. Singer commented that the number of cases seem to be underreported, based on personal experience. Mr. Singer again supported waiting to remove the mask mandate until case numbers reflect a true improvement of conditions instead of the beginning of a decline in cases.

Mr. Robert Kalantari, 8 Donovan Drive, commented that the news showed how happy students were in another state that dropped the mask mandate for schools. Mr. Kalantari added that friends who are teachers have had difficulty reading their students' facial expressions to determine their feelings. Mr. Kalantari repeated his position that masks do not provide protection, especially with children who touch their masks before touching their faces over the course of a day.

Ms. Patty Carluccio, 16 Washington Street, commented that she supports following DESE guidance. Mask mandates are being dropped all over the country. Ms. Carluccio added that there have been schools across the country that didn't require masks and death rates of those are the same as for areas that had schools require masks. A CDC article was submitted to the BOH through email. Ms. Carluccio acknowledged that there are concerns regarding dropping the school mask mandate right when students come back from vacation and suggested the mask mandate could be dropped before vacation to allow for illness to occur over vacation.

Ms. Carluccio added that the Town mask mandate should also be dropped. Having traveled around the State, Ms. Carluccio commented on how masking was different from town to town, but case rates weren't that different between towns. Businesses can make their own choices regarding masking in their establishments and people should be respectful of their choices.

Mr. Dan Walsh, 8 Red Coat Road, commented that he is against continuing the mask mandate and allowing people the freedom to choose to wear a mask or not.

Ms. Virginia Wang, 2 Avon Road, commented on Dr. Indelicato's comments regarding the availability of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. Ms. Wang commented that the vaccines haven't been very effective against the Omicron and Delta variants and only prevent severe illness, not infection. Ms. Wang added that the therapeutics aren't readily available, including at the local hospitals. Ms. Wang mentioned an article in the New York Times by a writer who had a lot of difficulty finding therapeutic treatment for a family member. Ms. Wang commented that a decision for the mask mandate shouldn't be based on the existence of therapeutics instead of how

widely available the treatments are. Ms. Wang added that there is only one therapeutic that has an emergency use authorization for people under 40 kilograms or 88 pounds.

Dr. Indelicato commented that people can still choose to wear a mask should the mask mandate be lifted. Masking in schools should also be kept optional. Dr. Indelicato acknowledged that therapeutics have been difficult to obtain. Fortunately, among his immunocompromised patients who have received both the vaccine and the booster, if infected, only a few needed hospitalization. Dr. Indelicato added that the vaccine is meant to prevent severe illness, especially as variants like Omicron emerge. Conditions change, and people should change with them. Dr. Indelicato commented that long COVID is still being looked at, but the 50% percentage mentioned earlier is overestimated.

Ms. Raj thanked everyone for their comments and for emailing the BOH with information and comments. As there were no further public comments, Ms. Raj closed the public comment portion of the meeting.

COVID-19 Response: Mask Mandate Review and Potential Vote

Ms. Raj commented that at the last BOH meeting, there was discussion regarding DESE's decision on the school mask mandate, which was announced that it is expiring on February 28th. Some BOH members thought DESE's decision was important with regards to Bedford's mask mandate and whether more data was needed after DESE guidance was released or if the BOH was ready to determine an end date for the Town mask mandate, at which point the mandate would become a strong recommendation.

Ms. Raj added that after DESE announced their decision, Ms. Porter asked Ms. Raj if the BOH would like to meet to discuss the mask mandate, as some discussion hinged on DESE's decision. Ms. Raj decided a meeting would be appropriate sooner rather than waiting until the end of the month to discuss the issue. Ms. Raj asked each BOH member to comment on any effect DESE's decision had on their opinion of when or if to lift Bedford's mask mandate.

Dr. Brunkhorst commented that while some people are ready to remove their masks, there are also people who are still concerned and want to keep masking in place. There have been some concerns regarding messaging and having enough time to announce any change. There have also been concerns expressed regarding indoor gatherings.

Dr. Brunkhorst also wanted to make sure that it was clear that the current Bedford mask mandate doesn't cover the schools, and as far as she knew, the other mitigation efforts taking place in the schools would continue after the mask mandate is lifted. The testing program will also continue, but she would like it to be more robust.

Dr. Brunkhorst commented that she would like the mask mandate to stay in place through March 7th in case there is a bump in cases after school vacation. If the BOH wants schools to keep masking between February 28th through March 7th, the Bedford mask mandate would have to be amended.

Dr. Brunkhorst asked if Ms. Porter talked with Superintendent Conrad. Ms. Porter replied that she was in communication with him once DESE made their announcement. Superintendent Conrad

knows the Bedford mask mandate doesn't cover the schools and was informed of the BOH meeting tonight to discuss the mask mandate.

Ms. Porter commented that as a public health professional, she wants to be conservative and more data isn't a bad thing. In their decision, DESE had discussed the issue with their medical professionals and the MA DPH, so doctors and epidemiologists were consulted.

Dr. Brunkhorst asked if the school musical fell under the purview of the schools since it was being held in the school. Ms. Porter replied that school-sponsored events fell under DESE guidance. Ms. Porter added that the Bedford mask mandate has a provision that if events were held outside of school activities, the mask mandate would be in place.

Dr. Brunkhorst suggested messaging should be sent to the School Committee recommending masking during larger indoor school gatherings, such as the musical, to help better protect everyone.

Dr. Brunkhorst commented that she liked the idea of using hospitalizations as part of the mask mandate off-ramp. There is a metric for total admissions of confirmed COVID-19 patients over a seven day rolling average, which includes both adults and children. On January 26th, 2021, that metric was 51 patients, compared to 21 patients in early November 2021, and the metric is currently 25 patients. Another possible metric is ICU capacity. Dr. Brunkhorst added that by defining the off-ramp of the mask mandate, the mask mandate could be put back into place if needed.

Dr. Kiessling commented that a lot of concerns expressed are due to a lack of relevant data. In terms of large indoor gatherings, they are not a source of outbreaks, according to the MA contact tracing. Dr. Kiessling reminded everyone that, according to MA DPH data, 99% of new infections are in the home and there have been no reported outbreaks from large gatherings or restaurants.

Dr. Kiessling commented that people have an unrealistic expectation on the helpfulness of masks. Middlesex County data showed that there was no statistically significant difference in cases between towns with and without mask mandates during the height of the surge. There were some months where there was a significant difference between towns with and without indoor mask mandates, and those with a mask mandate for municipal buildings also showed a slight decrease in cases. Dr. Kiessling added that Middlesex County would be a good county to look at for any different metrics requested by the BOH as it is a very diverse county in terms of town size, population density, and has a high vaccination rate compared to the National average.

Dr. Kiessling commented that the case numbers from the MA DPH will no longer be as meaningful due to the large number of at-home tests being done without a follow-up PCR test. She added that a couple of large practices in hospitals have stopped reporting cases from people who call in to report a positive at-home test in order to focus on patients who become very ill. More realistic metrics will be hospitalizations and deaths. Bedford has experienced comparatively small numbers of hospitalizations and deaths.

Dr. Brunkhorst commented that it has been agreed that the County level data for hospitalizations and deaths would need to be used as Bedford hospitalization data is anecdotal.

Dr. Kiessling commented that percent positivity may also be a useful metric, but did not get a chance to look at the data.

Dr. Kiessling added that messaging could be improved for those people considered at-risk, especially to not rely solely on masks for protection. Children aren't particularly at-risk and do not need to be masked. Dr. Kiessling commented that the 50% mentioned during the public comment period of people experiencing long COVID is much too high, and if long COVID exists, it only affects a small percentage of people.

Dr. Kiessling commented that the Bedford mask mandate should be dropped. She supports upholding DESE's decision.

Ms. Richichi commented that one of the goals has been to keep transmission as low as possible, but Omicron has made that difficult. While Superintendent Conrad spoke to Ms. Porter regarding the school mask mandate ending, Ms. Richichi was disappointed he didn't speak to the BOH. Ms. Richichi commented that she agrees with Dr. Kiessling about case numbers not being helpful anymore and that hospitalizations would be a better metric.

Ms. Richichi commented that it is hard for individuals and families to understand their risk of infection, partly due to confusing messaging. It is important to understand the risk for certain activities. Ms. Richichi noted the low amount of transmission in the schools. Ms. Richichi continued by commenting that it will be important to help families gauge their risk and the amount of risk they are willing to accept given the changing conditions occurring.

Ms. Richichi commented that an epidemiologist, Dr. William Hanage of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, had said that the pandemic isn't over yet and the future will depend on the COVID-19 virus, which we have no control over, and the choices people continue to make in terms of caring for ourselves and others in the community. Ms. Richichi commented that when the mask mandate ends, the BOH still has a responsibility to care for one another and continue to promote the different mitigation strategies to keep the virus transmission as low as possible.

Ms. Richichi commented that she hasn't been able to think of a specific metric regarding hospitalizations, but is pleased to see the downward trend in the data.

Ms. Richichi commented that she was surprised the week after school break wasn't kept under the DESE mask mandate. She expects a slight bump in cases, but since we are now towards the end of the Omicron surge, she doesn't expect it to be as large as the increase in cases after winter break during the peak of the Omicron surge.

Ms. Richichi commented that it is time to discuss ending the mask mandate. She commented that while other states like New Jersey are dropping their mask mandates, their end date is March 7th. Ms. Richichi commented the Bedford mask mandate could align with DESE's or perhaps extend to the week after in case there is a bump in cases associated with school break.

Ms. Richichi also expressed concern over the vaccination rate. Overall, the rate is 78%, which is lower than other towns in Middlesex County, which may correspond to the higher case numbers and transmission rates compared to other Middlesex County towns. Seniors, who are especially vulnerable, only have an 81% vaccination rate.

Dr. Kiessling commented that the senior vaccination rate could be higher since some vaccinations may not have been reported depending on where they were received. Ms. Richichi replied that even if the vaccination rate is changed by a few percentage points, there are still a large number of seniors who haven't been vaccinated yet.

Ms. Richichi added that the rate of booster shots for Middlesex County is only 40%. Boosters have been shown to help, especially among seniors. The low percentage of people who have received their booster shots is concerning.

Dr. Kiessling asked what the goal was to increase the rate of vaccination among seniors. Ms. Richichi commented that vaccinations have been shown to decrease hospitalizations and deaths.

Dr. Kiessling commented that vaccinations prevent hospitalizations among healthy people, but that 50% of people dying from COVID-19 have been fully vaccinated. Ms. Richichi replied that it is due to the virus exacerbating underlying conditions and causing complications.

Ms. Richichi commented that vaccinations were never said to be 100% effective, but some protection is better than no protection, especially for someone with underlying conditions. This is important to consider when people are assessing their risk.

Ms. Richichi also commented on the vaccination rates in the schools. While the High School staff and student vaccination has reached 80%, the elementary schools are very low, comparatively. In many surrounding communities, school vaccination rates are also higher than Bedford's.

Ms. Richichi commented that the lower vaccination rates compared to other Middlesex County towns may account for Bedford's higher case count and positivity rate. It could also be due to people's choices regarding gatherings.

Ms. Richichi commented that she is unsure about dropping the mask mandate on the 28th, or if it would be better to wait until March to account for the week after school break. Dropping the mask mandate may also encourage those, especially parents, waiting to see if there are side-effects after receiving the vaccine to get vaccinated or get their children vaccinated.

Ms. Schwartz commented that while she had suggested aligning with DESE at the last BOH meeting, she wants to make sure that the date makes sense. Ms. Schwartz is encouraged by the availability of vaccines, masks, and tests, but she is concerned the residents aren't taking advantage of these resources. Not everyone may be getting vaccinated beyond the first shot of the series. The participation in the school testing programs could be higher, and she would like residents to self-test at home more.

Ms. Schwartz commented that masking is just one of the preventive measures to help protect against the virus, but it was the only one mandated. Even if the mask mandate is removed, no one is being told to not mask. Instead, people are being asked to assess the risk to themselves and others before deciding whether to wear a mask or not.

Ms. Schwartz commented that each person's situation is unique and that will affect their decision to wear a mask or not. There has been a lot of division on the subject and Ms. Schwartz wants to

move forward as a community. Ms. Schwartz added that there have also been mental health effects and concerns across all age groups.

Ms. Schwartz commented that she has concerns about keeping the mask mandate in place as well as lifting the mask mandate. The important thing will be for people to assess their risk, the risk to the immediate community, and the risk to the overall community. If the mask mandate is removed, Ms. Schwartz would like to see it replaced with a mask advisory that includes clear information on which masks provide the most protection and how to properly wear the masks.

Ms. Schwartz added that if the mask mandate is lifted, she hopes the community moves forward together. Some businesses may still require masks in their establishments. Families may ask for visitors to a gathering to wear a mask.

Ms. Schwartz commented that she doesn't know if she would be more or less comfortable with the mask mandate ending a week after school break. Whichever way the BOH decides on the mask mandate tonight, she hopes Bedford residents will continue to look out for their neighbors.

Dr. Kiessling commented that the data doesn't support the concern regarding large gatherings. The MA DPH data on clusters of cases reported 29,395 new clusters, defined as two or more cases in one location. Social gatherings, retail services, restaurants and food courts, recreational/cultural, places of worship, other workplaces, other health care, and other food establishments have no clusters associated with them. Organized athletics and camps had one cluster, long-term care facilities had 14 clusters, and K through 12 schools had three clusters. Households accounted for 29,338 clusters. This information should alleviate some concerns about the upcoming High School musical and Town Meeting.

Ms. Schwartz commented the mask mandate would be replaced with a strong recommendation and event organizers can make their own decisions. There is value in using all the protective measures, and not mandating a measure doesn't mean it isn't a valuable protective measure.

Dr. Brunkhorst commented that other large gatherings, such as a Celtics game, require proof of vaccination. Masking is still valid advice and the choice is part of the risk assessment. Some places still require masking, and social distancing, and are placing limits on attendance. Dr. Brunkhorst agreed with Ms. Richichi on assessing risk.

Dr. Kiessling commented that the statistical analysis on Middlesex County towns showed a 5% to 6% decrease in cases. Dr. Brunkhorst commented that according to the CDC, a KN95 mask can reduce transmission by 60%. The main point is that masking is just one part of the toolbox to prevent illness.

Dr. Brunkhorst added that the messaging going forward is to respect one another regardless of their choice to wear or not wear a mask. This is especially important in the schools regarding bullying. Mental health is very important, and affects those who are fearful and those who are ready to take off their masks.

Dr. Brunkhorst added that she isn't comfortable removing the mask mandate today and prefers to look at the data again at the BOH meeting on the 28th. Hospitalizations at a county level are important and are also reported on a regional level.

Ms. Raj commented that the discussion between individuals' rights versus the collective community's rights has been going on forever and has been a source of conflict when it comes to a mask mandate and COVID-19.

Ms. Raj asked Dr. Kiessling about the different studies on mask efficacy and if they focus on transmission. There was a large shift from the beginning when COVID-19 was thought to be spread on surfaces to when it was determined to be airborne, which is usually isolated by placing a patient in a negative pressure room. While the mask may not do much for the inhale of breath, Ms. Raj commented she is willing to wear multiple mask layers if it protects others from her exhale if she is sick.

Dr. Kiessling replied that mask usage as Ms. Raj described works well for diseases like tuberculosis, but not against viruses. Masks and lockdowns were shown to not be as effective back with the 1918 flu pandemic. It has been known for a long time to not depend solely on masks. At the beginning of COVID-19, it was unknown who was susceptible. By the Fall of 2020, it was more known who was susceptible, but Dr. Kiessling commented, people are still acting like it is still unknown. Dr. Kiessling added that masks are not enough to protect someone with a serious comorbidity. As a BOH, members should be giving data and good guidance, which can be found from the CDC and MA DPH. Dr. Kiessling commented that the data should help reassure residents that Bedford is a safe place with only 61 deaths, of which 45 occurred in the first two months of the pandemic. To protect a vulnerable person, get tested before visiting them.

Ms. Porter commented that unfortunately, there were two deaths attributed to COVID-19 in December and another in January. Regarding vulnerable populations, the COA includes messaging in their newsletter, and the Health Department guidance encourages testing before and after visiting a vulnerable person. The messaging always includes multiple protection methods.

Dr. Kiessling commented that she has seen signs encouraging wearing masks to save lives. Ms. Porter replied that those signs aren't from the Health Department. The Health Department has two signs, one in front of the Police Department and the other in front of the DPW building, announcing a mask mandate is in effect.

Ms. Richichi commented that with the importance of testing, a strong message should be sent to parents who don't have their children participating in the school testing program to encourage them to do so. When masks come off in schools, testing will be very important to keep transmission low in the schools and protect vulnerable people at home.

Dr. Kiessling asked what testing at the schools will do now. Ms. Richichi replied that cases have to get into the home from somewhere before spreading throughout the household. Children playing with children of a different household, parties, gatherings are all ways to spread the virus and testing at schools can help catch some of those cases. Ms. Richichi added that it is disconcerting that participation remains low even with reminders and encouragement each week from the Superintendent.

Dr. Kiessling commented that it would be interesting to find out why participation is low in the testing program. Ms. Richichi replied a survey could be done, especially with the staff. One possible reason for parents is unwillingness to test in case it results in a positive test. Even

asymptomatic, a student with a positive test result must stay home, disturbing the family from work when the situation is finally returning close to normal. Ms. Richichi added that the school testing program will also help keep schools open and the messaging should encourage everyone to sign up for the program.

Ms. Richichi added that testing should also be done before visiting someone vulnerable, and before returning to school or work, regardless of the mask mandate status. Ms. Schwartz agreed and added that some of the protective measures have different levels of effectiveness. The community needs to participate in all of them, assess their risk, and then act for the greater good.

Ms. Raj commented that one of the reasons this BOH meeting was called was at the previous meeting, there was discussion regarding making the Bedford mask mandate coterminous with the school mask mandate. With DESE announcing the end of their mask mandate on February 28th, the BOH needs to discuss the Bedford mask mandate and come to a decision.

Dr. Brunkhorst commented that she would like to keep the mask mandate through March 7th and come up with an off-ramp in case there is a future variant of concern and hospitalizations increase again.

Dr. Kiessling moved to make the mask mandate off-ramp coterminous with DESE on February 28th. Ms. Schwartz seconded the motion, opening the floor for discussion.

Ms. Raj commented that she isn't ready to make the Bedford mask mandate coterminous with the school mask mandate. Ms. Raj would like to look at the data at the end of the month and consider hospitalization and positivity rates as part of the off-ramp as discussed. This would require determining values for these metrics.

Ms. Richichi commented that one concern she had regarding using hospitalizations as a metric is that the values are small and can possibly fluctuate above and below a set value. This would be problematic if it keeps triggering the mandate.

Ms. Schwartz commented that whichever metric is chosen, it should be one that is already being used at the State or Federal level. Ms. Schwartz suggested the BOH align the Town mask mandate with DESE or set a date for the mask mandate to be lifted, possibly March 7th.

Ms. Porter presented the data collected showing changes with time since the beginning of August. The data includes a variety of possible metrics that could be used for the off-ramp of the mask mandate. Another possible off-ramp is to look at the trends of the metrics over time. One community uses changes over the course of a month in their mask mandate off-ramp. Ms. Porter added that values of the various metrics are known when the COVID-19 conditions were good, so those values could be used as conditions for the mask mandate.

Ms. Richichi commented that she prefers to look at the percent a value has changed month to month as many of the absolute values of the metrics were during the Delta and Omicron surges.

Dr. Kiessling repeated her view that mandating mask wearing did not make much difference. She added that if mask wearing had a large effect, there would be a large statistical difference between

the different Middlesex County communities in January when Omicron was at its peak. Only a small, not statistically significant change was found.

Ms. Schwartz asked if the components for a mask advisory are in place or would it have to be written in advance of the mask mandate ending. Ms. Porter replied it would depend on how specific the BOH would like to be with the advisory.

Dr. Kiessling commented that the BOH received a letter signed by residents asking for CDC guidance to be followed, so the CDC language could be used for the advisory. Ms. Porter commented that the CDC language also includes language advising people to wear masks indoors in areas of high transmission.

Dr. Kiessling asked about the current language for an off-ramp. Ms. Porter replied that currently, the mask mandate is in effect as long as transmission rate levels are considered 'high'. If transmission rates are at a lower level for four weeks, the mask mandate can be lifted. The CDC language recommends mask wearing for people in areas of 'substantial' or 'high' levels of transmission.

Dr. Kiessling commented that she doesn't expect mask usage to change much in Bedford once the mandate changes to a recommendation or advisory.

Dr. Brunkhorst supports a strong advisory once the mask mandate is lifted.

Ms. Richichi made an amendment to the motion on the floor that when the Bedford mask mandate ends coterminous with DESE, an advisory would be issued that residents continue to mask in indoor public spaces while the CDC classifies Bedford in the 'high' or 'substantial' transmission rate category.

Ms. Porter commented that she had prepared a document which could be used as part of a policy statement or recommendation. It includes a statement that the BOH promotes the following recommendations to continue in a positive trajectory in mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations include getting vaccinated and boosted, and getting tested, including participation in the school testing program and availability of tests in Town buildings, when to get tested. Further recommendations include wearing a mask, increasing ventilation, washing hands, staying home if experiencing symptoms, and isolating if positive for COVID-19, even if asymptomatic. Ms. Schwartz commented the document is a good start to have something in place when the mask mandate is dropped.

Ms. Richichi commented that if the mask mandate is coterminous with DESE, she would like to have something in place on the 28th. Ms. Porter replied she would send the document to the BOH members and make amendments as they are submitted by the BOH members.

Ms. Raj commented that if the motion fails, a date to end the mask mandate could be chosen at the next BOH meeting on the 28th and Ms. Porter's document could be discussed and approved so everything would be in place for when the mask mandate is lifted.

Ms. Porter commented that the DESE mask mandate ends on the 28th. If the BOH votes for the Bedford mask mandate to end the same day, there will be several hours between the ending of the

mask mandate and the BOH meeting in the evening, during which the BOH can discuss and vote on an advisory. Ms. Porter just wanted the BOH to be aware that an advisory would not go immediately into effect when the mask mandate is lifted.

Ms. Raj called for a roll call vote on Dr. Kiessling's motion to end the Bedford mask mandate coterminous with DESE's school mask mandate and Ms. Richichi's amendment to have an advisory issued that residents continue to mask in public indoor spaces while transmission levels are 'high' or 'substantial'. Dr. Kiessling, Ms. Schwartz, and Ms. Richichi voted in support of the motion. Dr. Brunkhorst and Ms. Raj opposed the motion. The motion passed 3-2-0 to end the mask mandate on February 28th.

Ms. Richichi commented that the BOH was not influenced by the people who have written or made comments to the BOH. She added that the BOH looked carefully at the information, considered it, and made the best decision they can for Bedford's residents.

Ms. Schwartz repeated the point for residents to assess their risk, their families' risk, and the community's risk. Residents should respect the decisions of others with regards to masking.

Dr. Brunkhorst again encouraged residents to sign up for the various testing options at the schools or to take advantage of the home test kits that are available.

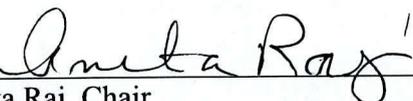
Ms. Richichi commented that the pandemic isn't over and asks people to be mindful of that fact.

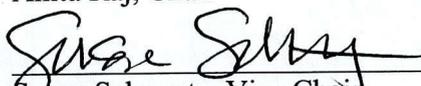
At 8:10 PM, Dr. Kiessling moved to adjourn the meeting of February 14th, 2022. Ms. Richichi seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of 5-0-0.

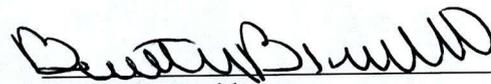
Documents and Exhibits Used During this Meeting

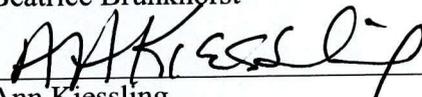
Monthly COVID-19 Data Since August for Bedford, Middlesex County, and Region

The next scheduled meetings of the Board of Health are February 28th, March 7th, March 21st, April 11th, April 25th, May 9th, May 23rd, June 13th, and June 27th.


Anita Raj, Chair


Susan Schwartz, Vice Chair


Beatrice Brunkhorst


Ann Kiessling


Maureen Richichi