

Dozens of Westfield residents speak against mask mandate at City Council

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Westfield resident Laura Pisano is one of dozens who spoke at the City Council meeting on Dec. 16 against the mask mandate issued by the Board of Health. (SUBMITTED / WESTFIELD COMMUNITY TELEVISION)

WESTFIELD — In a spillover from the virtual Board of Health meeting on Dec. 15, at which dozens of people tuned in to witness a unanimous vote to implement a city-wide mask mandate effective Dec. 20, many of those same people voiced their outrage during public participation at the City Council meeting the next evening.

The council, while acknowledging that it had no authority over the Board of Health, responded after an hour of comments with a 7 to 6 vote asking the Board of Health to cite the scientific evidence they used to determine the efficacy of wearing a mask in protecting against COVID-19, to refer it to the mayor, Board of Health and Law Department, and to post it on the city website.

The council also unanimously voted to ask the Law Department to review the Board of Health mandate for compliance with Massachusetts General Laws.

Many of the people speaking cited sources that they said showed masks are not effective in stopping the spread of the disease, and are detrimental to children and to people's health. They also questioned the Board of Health's authority to make the decision, following the end of the declared state of emergency in Massachusetts.

Jessica Breton said she has participated in eight of the last nine School Committee meetings and two recent Board of Health meetings. Breton said her background is in pharmaceutical sales, and she has yet to find anything of substance backing the mask mandate. She also said

she found the suggestion by Board of Health member Stan Strzempko that the mask mandate include an exemption for fully vaccinated individuals discriminatory.

“I will not comply,” she said.

Strzempko’s suggestion had been rejected at the Board of Health meeting, citing the continuing presence of “breakthrough” infections of vaccinated individuals, and the logistical headache for businesses to have to verify vaccination status for each person who comes through their doors.

At the City Council meeting, resident Adam Ripka said he thought the mask mandate was a ploy to get more people vaccinated in the city, and asked how can “three unelected bureaucrats determine what is reasonable for 41,000 residents.”

Gabriella Michaliszyn said for a regulation to be reasonable, it has to be useful, and asked will it work, do masks work, and are there any risks. She said she personally knew someone who got bacterial pneumonia from wearing masks all day.

“We also need to look at mask safety,” she said.

Daniel Liesi expressed concern about oxygen levels dropping when masks are worn.

“The Bible tells us that oxygen is the breath of life. You put that mask on, your oxygen levels drop immediately, and you’re breathing more carbon dioxide than anything else,” he said.

Rob Thresher said that the aerosolized particles of the virus were much like the fine particles in wildfire smoke, which the Centers for Disease Control said last year that cloth masks do not protect against.

Maksim Sychev said in the Republic of Kazakhstan, where he is originally from, women have been forced to wear face coverings to break their will. He also said he works in the construction field, and has been dealing with construction-grade 3M masks for a while, which state on the box that they are not intended to prevent transmission of bacterial and viral particles.

“Now we’re wearing tiny tissue, and that’s going to stop the spread?” he questioned. He said the pandemic has been used as a continued cover story, which may even have been planned to transfer wealth and manipulate data.

Laura Pisano said city officials need to be people-centered, not centered on what doctors say; on what is good for the people, and to seek out the truth. She said a source from another doctor concluded that healthy people should not be wearing surgical or cloth masks.

“Masks are not effective, and it is a form of control, I’m concerned that a lot of this is almost reminiscent of Nazi Germany, trying to control the people,” she said.

At this point, the public participation had reached 30 minutes, its maximum allotted time. At-large Councilor Dave Flaherty asked to suspend public participation after the next speaker and take the motion addressing the Board of Health out of order for a vote.

Councilor Nicholas J. Morganelli Jr. said he wanted everyone who came to the meeting to speak.

“None of them were allowed to speak at the Board of Health. It is our elected duty to have each of them speak tonight,” he said to applause, which also was given after every speaker. Morganelli then made a motion to continue until everyone had the opportunity to speak. Flaherty withdrew his motion.

Katrina Ripka said her husband’s dental hygienist learned in school that masks do not prevent viral infection, and had to be changed every 20 minutes. She then read from the Declaration of Independence. “If you want to wear a mask, by golly, have at it. Wear 10 if you want. Nobody can force others. To breathe freely is every person’s God-given, inalienable right,” Ripka said, adding, “I dissent. I will not participate in the tyrannical fear-mongering tactic by covering what God made to remain uncovered.”

Bill Sperry, a retired 30-year teacher in Holyoke, then expressed his concern about the impact of masks on children in school.

“I know kids come into school every day with a lot of baggage,” he said. “Masks do not stop anxiety, depression, suicide ideation; what students are dealing with not only in this city but nationwide. Suicide rates are up in male and female students. It’s not only psychological damage we’re doing, but in social skills, non-verbal communication. They can’t smile at one another, can’t laugh together. This is how sick this is getting. It has to come to an end, or we’re going to lose a generation. Please consider our young people,” Sperry said.

Other speakers expressed many of the same concerns and theories. At the end of an hour, no other speakers came forward, and public participation was closed. Council President Brent B. Bean II called for a two-minute recess.

During the debate about the motion to go to the Board of Health, Councilor Dan Allie said while the board has the authority to recommend reasonable regulations in an emergency, Massachusetts is no longer in a state of emergency. He also said the public did not have the opportunity to view the policy before the vote. The mask mandate, which covers any publicly accessible indoor space, including businesses, carries a \$1,000-per-day fine for violations.

Flaherty said it is not reasonable to ask businesses to enforce a government mandate.

“If they want to enforce this, they can hire a whole bunch of people to go around and try to enforce it,” he said, adding the fine is an undue burden on local businesses.

At-large Councilor James Adams said he agreed to the motion because he wants to the public to see the information that was requested.

“I have to take the side of Stan Strzempko and Juanita Carnes, who live this every day,” Adams said. “They probably are two of the best people — in my mind, you couldn’t find a better nurse or a better doctor.

“Many of you know I own a funeral home, Many of you know I’ve buried hundreds of people who had the COVID virus. ... I can tell you people are dying, because I’m burying them. I have no idea how they got it or what prevents it. The public health director and the people on the board probably don’t know either, but are trying to do their best,” Adams said, adding, “They’re not trying to make us miserable, they’re trying to save lives.”