

# County to consider masks again

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**GUILFORD COUNTY** — The Guilford County Board of Commissioners has called a special meeting for Thursday, Jan. 13, in its Board of Health role to consider reinstating a face mask mandate as result of the post-holiday surge in COVID-19 infections.

The board will meet at 5 p.m. Thursday through the Zoom virtual platform and it will be livestreamed through the Guilford County page on Facebook.

Chairman Skip Alston, an advocate of a countywide mask mandate in the battle against COVID-19, has said he wants to meet with health professionals to see whether the mask mandate should be reinstated to curb rising numbers of infections.

In August, the board instituted a requirement for everyone to wear a mask when indoors at public places in Guilford County to counter the summer surge, which was fueled by the delta variant. The commissioners ended the restrictions in mid-November after the average number of people in the county testing positive for the virus remained under 5% for three consecutive weeks.

After the omicron variant began to spread, the rate of positive tests rose, and the rate has skyrocketed since Christmas, going from 11.8% on Dec. 24 to 27.4% on Jan. 1, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services said.

# MASKS

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Board member James Upchurch said he plans to vote against another mask mandate but does not know whether five other members will vote in favor of a proposal to mandate masks through Feb. 27 or until the positivity rate is under 5% for more than 14 days.

"There's been some arm-twisting, so now there may be five votes," Upchurch said. "I think some people are on the fence and they probably will be persuaded."

The mayors from a majority of county municipalities other than Greensboro have opposed imposing or enforcing mask mandates, Upchurch said. The county board could approve a public health rule only for unincorporated areas, he said. One other complication is the county's contract for mask mandate enforcement has expired, Upchurch said.

"I understand cases are

increasing," Upchurch said. "It's unfortunate, we don't want to see that, but we do know that the severity of this (omicron) variant is a lot less deadly than the delta. At some point, we have to figure out when we're going to move on. We have a vaccine if people want it. If people want to wear a mask they can. But at some point you have to accept the fact that this is never going away. There are always going to be new variants and this is just a part of our lives moving forward. Each individual is going to be responsible for looking out for themselves."

The omicron variant appears to be less likely than previous variants to cause severe illness, but because it is so highly contagious, the number of people requiring hospitalization is still extremely high and growing. The total across North Carolina rose to 2,722 on Jan. 2, DHHS said. There were barely more than 1,000 in mid-November.

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