

County officials signal return to face masks

State leaders warn of rapid COVID-19 spread

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GUILFORD COUNTY — Amid skyrocketing COVID-19 numbers locally and statewide, Guilford County officials signaled Tuesday that they favor a return to wearing masks in indoor public spaces, but they can't make that mandatory

countywide until late next week.

In the meantime, under state-of-emergency powers, the Guilford County Board of Commissioners adopted a mask-wearing order that applies only in unincorporated areas of Guilford County and in municipalities where mayors sign on.

That action came the same day that Gov. Roy Cooper and health leaders sounded an alarm about the growing burden of severe COVID-19 cases on hospitals and issued pleas for those who are not vaccinated to get their shots, and for anyone eligible to get a booster shot.

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MASKS

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Guilford's order takes effect Wednesday and will run through Jan. 13, when the commissioners will convene as the Guilford County Board of Health, Chairman Skip Alston announced at a press conference. The mask rule would cover all the municipalities across the county if the board approves it Jan. 13.

Alston and other county leaders met Monday with health professionals and local mayors. The mayors of Jamestown, Gibsonville, Pleasant Garden and Sedalia supported mask mandates for their jurisdictions, but other mayors, including High Point's, did not, Alston said.

"Due to the notice requirements associated with the Board of Health, we must rely on our municipal partners to help support this proclamation to address the immediate needs for mitigation efforts to slow down this surge," Alston said.

Alston said he hopes the business community will take control of their workplaces and require employees and customers to wear face masks. He also hopes city leaders will "put people before politics and people before party" and support the county's efforts to prevent the virus' spread.

When the county lifted the mask mandate in mid-November, the percentage of COVID-19 tests in Guilford County coming back as positive was about 5%, but since

the holidays the rate has shot up, hitting a single-day rate of 32% on Sunday, Alston said.

"Cases of COVID-19 are rising in Guilford County at a never-seen-before pace," he said.

Dr. Iulia Vann, Guilford County's public health director, reported that local hospital officials are extremely concerned and stretched thin within their facilities.

In a press conference with Cooper, N.C. Health and Human Services Secretary Kody Kinsley said 80% of hospital beds statewide, including 80% of intensive care unit beds, are occupied. Across North Carolina there were 3,008 COVID-19 patients hospitalized, Kinsley said. That's triple the number there were in mid-November.

Cooper and Kinsley urged the wearing of well-fitting, multilayer masks, if possible, a surgical or a procedure mask such as a KN95 or an N95.

The current surge in cases is driven by the highly contagious omicron variant. Although health officials say it is less likely than previous variants to cause illness severe enough to require hospitalization, it is so highly contagious that the sheer number of severe cases already is rivaling what hospitals faced during last summer's surge caused by the delta variant.

Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist High Point Medical Center had a seven-day average of 32.3 confirmed COVID-19 patients the week of Dec. 24-31, the most recent data available

from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The average during the summer delta peak in September was 38 a day. After that peak the number had dropped to 10.1 by late November.

In a media briefing Tuesday morning, Dr. David Priest of Novant Health said that the number of COVID-19 patients in Novant hospitals has jumped by 166% the past two weeks, pushing those facilities past 90% of capacity. More than 80% of those patients are unvaccinated.

Only 2% of the hospitalized patients have had a first full round of shots plus a booster shot, and all of them are in their late 70s or older and have other health problems that make them vulnerable to more complications, Priest said.

Priest warned that treatment options for those infected by the omicron variant are extremely limited — the monoclonal antibody treatment that had been most widely used does not work for omicron, and newly approved pills are still hard to get — making the need for vaccination urgent. People who have been vaccinated can still become infected but are extremely unlikely to become severely ill.

"For the next few weeks there will be limited treatment options if you get COVID," he said. "This virus is unavoidable in the community."

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