

**MINUTES OF BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF GUILFORD COUNTY
SPECIAL MEETING**

Greensboro, North Carolina
January 13, 2022

The Board of County Commissioners met in a duly noticed Special Meeting at 5:00PM using the web-based virtual platform, Zoom.

PRESENT: Chairman Melvin “Skip” Alston, presiding; Vice Chair J. Carlvena Foster; Commissioners Kay Cashion, Carolyn Q. Coleman, Alan Perdue, Mary Beth Murphy, Carly Cooke, Justin Conrad and James Upchurch.

ABSENT: None

ALSO PRESENT: County Manager Michael Halford; Interim County Attorney Matthew Mason; Assistant County Manager Jason Jones; Assistant County Manager Erris Dunston; Assistant County Manager Victor Isler; Clerk to Board Robin Keller; Deputy Clerk to Board Jessica Wolf; Worley Smith, Communications Manager; Dr. Iulia Vann, DHHS-Public Health Director; Jim Albright, Emergency Services Director; various members of County staff and media. Virtual participation was made available to the general public and the media.

I. WELCOME / CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Melvin “Skip” Alston welcomed those present and called the meeting to order at 5:04PM. He stated the purpose of this meeting is to receive a COVID-19 update and the state of our county and to take any necessary action according to the pandemic.

II. RECEIVE COVID-19 UPDATE ON STATE OF COUNTY

1. Public Health Update

Public Health Director Dr. Iulia Vann presented a COVID-19 update to the Board. She discussed metrics involving cases over the past 30 days, with mid-December staying around 200 positive cases per day. We have been seeing over 1,000 new positive cases a day during the first week of January. Our positivity rate has reached the highest that has been recorded since the start of the pandemic over the last two weeks. As of today, we are at 27.4% 14-day positivity rate with the daily positivity rate being 29.2%.

Dr. Vann discussed the Pandemic Vulnerability Index (PVI), which is based on four categories: infection rate, population concentration, intervention, and health environment. The PVI score for Guilford County yesterday was 0.58%, with 1% being the maximum score. The closer the score is to 1%, the higher the vulnerability of that county. Dr. Vann shared a graph comparing Guilford County's PVI to Mecklenburg, Orange, and Wake County throughout the pandemic. Guilford has had a higher vulnerability index than the compared counties. She also noted our PVI in relation to our previous mask mandates.

Dr. Vann compared peer jurisdictions in North Carolina with mask mandates, with Guilford County having a higher positivity rate and PVI than the surrounding counties compared. She also showed a graph comparing one-year positivity trendlines for select counties.

Dr. Vann shared mask-effectiveness studies with the Board. She highlighted multiple studies, including a meta-analysis that brings together 21 studies that shows the efficacy of masks for healthcare workers and non-healthcare workers that can reduce the risk of infection. Dr. Vann also discussed in detail mask-requirement studies that show the efficacy of mandates and other policy interventions.

2. Medical Community Update

Dr. Vann introduced Dr. Mary Jo Cagle and Dr. Cynthia Snider from Cone Health.

Dr. Cagle thanked the Board for discussing this important matter. She stated our health systems are stretched thin and this is a community situation that will take community effort to keep those that we serve safe. As of this morning, Cone Health System had 303 COVID-positive patients. High positivity rates among staff have presented staffing challenges. Dr. Cagle stated masks, vaccines, and boosters help protect from hospitalization and death and she also discussed the new mass testing site.

Dr. Snider presented to the Board. She showed that Guilford County has had a massive increase in reported cases. She stated the most important aspect is what is happening in our Emergency Rooms and Urgent Cares. We have had a 100% increase in two weeks, the highest we have ever seen. We are also seeing more influenza illnesses on top of COVID illnesses.

Dr. Snider discussed some key points for the community regarding spread, therapeutics, and mitigation strategies to consider. She discussed staffing shortages that present challenges to providing quality care to the community. She noted the COVID-positive case projections and stated there are still many unknowns at this time.

Dr. Snider discussed the impacts of widespread community transmission. She spoke to different mitigation strategies and the key points for us to consider. She shared information related to the effectiveness of mask mandates and that those areas have shown to likely have lower positivity rates. She reviewed her key points with the Board.

Guilford County Emergency Services Director, Jim Albright, spoke to the Board. He spoke to the impacts this wave has had on the Emergency Services Department. We have been

functioning down at about 20% due to staffing shortages. He stated we typically average about 220 calls per day for service and yesterday we serviced the highest number of calls in the history of the ambulance service, serving 320 citizens. Albright stated we don't have the resources to match the current demand of services. He stated we are looking for help at any options that exist.

III. CONSIDER ADOPTION OF BOARD OF HEALTH RULE ON MASK

Chairman Alston thanked staff and guests for speaking to the Board.

Motion was made by Mary Beth Murphy and seconded by Kay Cashion to approve the proposed Board of Health Rule as filed with the Clerk with the following amendment to Section 6. Section 6 to now read as follows:

This Board of Health Rule becomes effective upon adoption and will remain in effect until the earlier of:

- 1. Expiration or termination of the proclamation of the local emergency**
- 2. February 27, 2022 at 5PM**
- 3. Modification or revocation by the Guilford County Board of Health**

There are several factors influencing the decision to implement a mask mandate. The Board of Health intends to continue to review all of these factors including the advice of our local health professionals, number of hospitalizations, ICU and ventilator utilization, emergency department wait times, ambulance unloading times at area hospitals, ambulance calls response times, vaccination rate, and positivity rate. Additionally, the Board of Health intends to have a formal review of these data points on February 3, 2022, and again during each scheduled Board of Commissioner meeting until a comprehensive review of these data suggests that we should lift the mask mandate.

VOTE: Motion carried 6 - 3

AYES: Melvin "Skip" Alston, J. Carlvena Foster, Kay Cashion, Carly Cooke, Mary Beth Murphy, Carolyn Q. Coleman

NOES: James Upchurch, Alan Perdue, Justin Conrad

Commissioner Murphy thanked Dr. Vann for a very comprehensive presentation. She stated it's clear that the impacts of COVID on our community are significant and as our role as the Board of Health, it's important that we do whatever we can to ensure safety in our community. She also noted to the previous metrics that have been removed in order to provide flexibility in assessing the ongoing mandate and it's the Board's intention to have a regular review of the data.

Vice Chairman Foster noted that Atrium/Wake Forest representatives are not on this call, but she personally spoke with them to get a better understanding of the virus impacts, particularly in the High Point area. She has received many e-mails and calls for and against the mandate but stated

it's important that we do what we can to limit the spread of the virus, so she is in support of the mask mandate.

Commissioner Cashion asked for clarification from Dr. Snider regarding some of her data.

Dr. Snider clarified the 100% increase is the volume in emergency rooms.

Commissioner Cashion asked if they determine how much of the increase is due to issues other than those related to COVID.

Dr. Snider stated they did not differentiate that, but the key part is they were concerned about the wait times that individuals were having to be admitted and the wait times those individuals were having to be seen. She stated that there is also a 100% increase in COVID patients being admitted.

Commissioner Cashion noted that she has received many e-mails and phone calls and wants the public to know she appreciates and respects everyone's thoughts and comments on this issue. She stated some feedback from businesses has been in support to help protect their employees.

Commissioner Conrad noted a National Institute of Health study that he sent to the Clerk and is frustrated none of that information was included in the information presented tonight. He stated there is a bit more of disagreement within the health community than what may have been presented here. He noted other approaches that could be taken into consideration.

Commissioner Cooke echoed some of the comments made by other commissioners, but she also noted that the access to healthcare is in jeopardy and she cannot ignore the pleas from our medical providers. She noted that she recognizes the burden it places on some of our small businesses and stated that it's important that the duration of the mandate is not any longer than necessary.

Commissioner Upchurch stated it's his responsibility to listen to his constituents and this is something that they don't support, so for that reason alone he will not be supporting this mandate. He stated that he did have questions regarding the effectiveness of mask mandates. Commissioner Upchurch asked the Cone Health representatives if they can confirm that it's expected to reach peak Omicron cases next week?

Dr. Snider stated that while it's too early to tell, there's a good chance that we are starting to reach the peak in cases. She stated she is cautiously optimistic that the peak will come but is hopeful that the impact of quick intervention will be seen quickly.

Dr. Cagle added that we are seeing the highest number of hospitalizations and cases statewide today than we have previously seen. She noted that if we see peak cases in the next 3-5 days, then we can expect peak hospitalizations about a week after that and is planning for the next 2-3 weeks to be the most intense weeks.

Commissioner Upchurch noted to the severity of the Omicron strain and stated we are at the lowest level of percentage of adults in the ICU than we have been throughout this whole pandemic. He asked if the Cone Health representatives have seen a reduction in severity.

Dr. Cagle stated that while we are seeing less in the ICU, we are being overwhelmed by the volume of admissions. She noted to the 41 deaths we have seen since Christmas and stated that is a lot of deaths in that time from one disease.

Commissioner Upchurch questioned if their staffing shortages were due to workers having COVID.

Dr. Cagle clarified that it's not only that, but workers are burnt out and are stepping away.

Commissioner Upchurch asked if there have been any conversations around changing hospital policies regarding vaccinated workers.

Dr. Cagle stated they haven't discussed changing their policies.

Commissioner Upchurch asked Dr. Vann if we have the staff and ability to enforce these mandates?

Dr. Vann stated that we have brought back all the team members who were involved in the previous mandate to provide support.

Commissioner Upchurch stated that each meeting he is going to be asking for a review of the Health Department's enforcement.

Chairman Alston noted to our enforcement policies and stated it's not our desire to issue citations, we want to educate, and our first priority is to protect our citizens.

Commissioner Coleman noted to the seriousness of COVID and stated that this disease is no joke. She stated the importance of testing and vaccination.

Chairman Alston thanked the medical professionals for their input and their hard work for our community.

IV. ADJOURN

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned by unanimous consent at 6:21PM.

Melvin "Skip" Alston
Chairman

Robin Keller
Clerk to Board