MEMO

To: City Council
From: Courtney O’Donnell, Asst. City Manager
CC: Debbie Laurie, City Manager
RE: COVID-19 Masking
Date: August 19, 2022

On March 15, 2020, the Governor of Maine declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19. In the months following, masking mandates (along with other restrictions) were put in place, amended, and changed as the virus evolved, more information became known, and access to vaccines became readily available. In May 2021, the Governor repealed the mask mandate except for schools and childcare settings. By June 30, 2021, the State of emergency ended, along with the remaining mask mandate.

At this time, mask mandates turned into recommendations, except as federally regulated on transit (Community Connector and Bangor International Airport). Generally, the decision whether or not to continue to mandate masking was left up to individual entities. In response, on July 1, 2021, the City no longer required masking by employees, or members of the public, except when federally mandated. City Council and committee meetings returned to in-person and were open to the public, with hybrid options.

In August 2021, our internal conversations, including the school and library, primarily focused on “risk of transmission”, vaccinated v. unvaccinated, and evaluation of what to do when in “moderate” or “high” community levels for both employees and members of the public. By October 2021, Council decided a citywide building mask mandate was necessary, effective November 8, 2021, due to high transmission and other factors.

In March 2022, CDC no longer recommended masking indoors in most of Maine as we were moved to the “medium” category of community levels. By April, the masking mandate for transit was also lifted. Conversations with Council resulted in us continuing to require masking when in “high” category.

Now in August 2022, the conversation appears to have shifted. All age groups now have access to vaccine and/or boosters. Healthcare providers are no longer overwhelmed as they once were, which was a driving factor for guidelines and concerns for a long time. CDC is also beginning to relax its guidelines related to quarantines and social distancing, which marks a significant change in response.

The question is now whether or not the Council wishes to mandate OR recommend masking should we re-enter “high” category based on CDC guidelines.

Given this information and feedback from staff and the public, we believe returning to mandated masking may have consequences that outweigh the benefits, given availability of vaccines and option to mask. Staff recommendation is to follow the CDC guidelines related to masking recommendations, but no longer mandate. We will continue to make masks available to everyone and testing available to our employees.