

Dear Rules Committee: The following is a compilation of raw (unedited, copied and pasted) feedback from the staff at the Office of Legislative Operations regarding the current [State House Facemask Policy](#). We appreciate your time and interest in staff feedback on this issue. Mike Ferrant, Director of Legislative Operations

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I honestly think it should be personal preference and not mandatory, just like at our public schools. If it's safe enough for children to be at school without masks, it's safe enough for us adults to be at work without a mask.

I have no problem wearing a mask at the State House. In my Committee Room I would also be ok with not wearing a mask as it has never been crowded.

Should the policy be changed to allow people to wear a mask should they choose to do so, I would like to see what the requirement is for the type of mask.

Having a big face I would be more comfortable wearing the masks my wife made as they are designed for me.

I will continue to wear a mask regardless, and am much more comfortable in the State House with everyone wearing masks. Right now, the second, more contagious, Omicron variant is picking up speed in Europe, which statistically means it will start to spread widely in the States soon. Therefore, there's a good chance that before the session ends case-loads will go up again, hopefully not to the rate they were at before, but high enough for transmission in a building full of closely seated, mask-less people, to be likely.

I understand that it feels strange for people to wear masks when their kids or Grandkids aren't wearing them to schools, and no one is wearing them in grocery stores, but it should be taken into consideration that people using schools or local establishments are, most frequently, locals. Each week legislators travel from every corner of Vermont to work in the State House. Therefore, Covid getting spread around the State House could ultimately affect many communities, and greatly increase the chances of spread throughout the State. Keeping the mask mandate would help make that sort of spread significantly less likely.

I think we should keep the Mask Mandate policy in place through the end of the session. There are people in the building who are immunocompromised, and who are in touch with vulnerable populations. This seems like a small ask for all of use to keep masking a few more months for the physical and mental health safety of our community.

Throughout the course of the pandemic we've had quite a few backslides and moments where we've said "it's over" only for covid policies to go back to being more restrictive when an overzealous desire to get back to normal leads to a spike in cases. Please let's break this cycle and chose not to prematurely end a policy which has proven effective at lowering positive Covid case numbers.

In addition to the physical consequences of these cycles, there have been mental health consequences. Some folks may be hesitant to do away with masks because of this pattern recognition and trauma from repeated lockdowns, isolation, lifted policies, community spread, increased restrictions, repeat. While I do not think continuing to mask is harming anyone, I do think lifting the mask mandate before our minds have caught up with our bodies (or vice versa) has the potential to do both mental and physical harm. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and also people are more able to focus on their work when their physical and mental safety needs are met.

At this time, I do not think people should be pressured into sharing their personal health information in order to have people in their rooms put masks back on (and let's face it, it's not always possible to make that request of everyone when walking in hallways, using the bathroom, etc.). Let's stick with the current policy and allow for the reduced numbers of people at the State House in the summer to create a more natural transition back to a world without mask requirements.

If Joint Rules can publicly present a case, based on science, why it is safe to be in the State House without masks, then I have no basis to object. However, the messaging I hear is not typically based on science. More often it sounds political – “it's time for us to move on to the next phase, the endemic phase where we learn to live with COVID-19. People are so tired of wearing masks – enough is enough.”

Meanwhile, the pandemic is not over. Average cases per day in the US are about 30,000 (9 cases per 100,000) and around 1,100 deaths. In Vermont, we are currently averaging 131 cases per day (21 cases per 100,000). 13 out of Vermont's 14 counties have case rates above the national average. In Vermont, the daily average number of people hospitalized is 17, and in I.C.U.s is 5. In Europe and parts of Asia case rates are increasing, again, due to the variant Omicron BA-2 that is 30% more transmissible than Omicron BA-1. If past trends repeat themselves, then we will see increasing numbers in the US two or three weeks after the rise in Europe.

So show me a science based argument for not wearing a mask indoors, in Vermont, in the State House. I do not like wearing a mask, but it feels like a very small inconvenience during the next couple of months to help protect legislators, legislative staff and the public.

First, I recognize and offer my heartfelt appreciation for the measures the legislators have put in place to keep those of us who work here safe during these times when we have been faced with a severe, and potentially deadly, disease. Fortunately, numbers of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths are waning. This, as you know, is due to vaccines, treatment protocols, and continued safety practices. It is the relaxing of the latter that concerns me. After all, new sub-variants continue to present themselves. I heard on VPR that the Northeast is one of the regions in the U.S. that has the highest rate of infection from the BA.2 sub-variant (the most highly contagious variant to date). In your deliberations, please consider the advancing age of a number of legislators and the staff that serve your committees. In addition to being members of a particularly vulnerable age

group, a number of us also have significantly compromised immune systems and other co-morbidities. Many don't realize that vaccines are virtually useless in terms of protecting those of us with compromised immune systems

Despite the limitations you have imposed on the number of people who can be in a committee room at any given time, and despite the air filtration equipment that has been added to the rooms, committee members and staff have to sit in those rooms for hours on end. Removing the mask mandate raises the possibility of the viral load inside committee rooms increasing to more dangerous levels, and increases the risk of exposure of members and staff to the virus. Needing to navigate crowded hallways compounds that risk.

Masks are an integral component of protecting ourselves and others from this virus. We should remind ourselves and others that wearing a mask is not just to protect ourselves. It is to protect others, especially those of us who may be more vulnerable. Indeed, I consider the wearing of a mask during these times to be a societal responsibility.