

# The Use of Face Masks and Public Access to City Services

## ISSUE

The emergence of the SARS CoV-2 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) resulted in several adjustments to the way in which the City of Saskatoon (City) delivered its core services. When the Government of Saskatchewan's Public Health Orders were lifted on July 11, 2021, the City also lifted restrictions.

The COVID-19 situation has changed significantly from July 11, 2021, and as a result the Administration has reviewed options to ensure the continuity of City services and the health and safety of staff as well as residents accessing City services. How should the City proceed in this regard?

## BACKGROUND

On March 18, 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan officially declared a provincial State of Emergency as a response to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. On the following day, the City of Saskatoon responded by closing public walk-in access to City Hall and all City buildings, and closed leisure facilities. Subsequently, other adjustments were made to ensure the City could safely deliver services to residents while practicing safe physical distancing protocols.

On April 23, 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan released its Re-Open Saskatchewan Plan, which introduced a five-phased approach "to methodically, gradually and cautiously re-open businesses and services across Saskatchewan, beginning May 4, 2020." Phase 4 of the provincial plan permitted the re-opening of indoor and outdoor recreation facilities.

At its June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020 Special Meeting, City Council considered and approved the recommendations in an Administrative report titled, "City of Saskatoon: Roadmap to Recovery". That report ([link here item 4.1](#)) described the City's overall approach to re-opening facilities and services. At the same meeting, City Council considered a related report ([link here item 4.2](#)) on the reopening of recreation and sport facilities.

At the August 24, 2020 GPC meeting, City Council considered and approved the recommendations in an Administrative report titled, "The Use of Non-Medical Face Masks and Public Access to City Services." That report ([link here item 8.1.1](#)) described three options for implementation for City Services and facilities. The option City Council approved was to "require the use of non-medical face masks in all City Facilities."

The Government of Saskatchewan subsequently mandated mask use in indoor public spaces in Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert on November 6, 2020. Masks become mandatory in all indoor spaces in Saskatchewan on November 13, 2020.

On May 4, 2021, the Government of Saskatchewan released the Re-Opening Roadmap, a “three-step plan to gradually lift current public health restrictions as Saskatchewan reaches significant vaccination levels.” On July 11, 2021, the Government of Saskatchewan entered Step Three of the Re-Opening Roadmap and all public health orders related to COVID-19 were lifted. As of July 11, 2021, the public health order requiring masking in indoor spaces ended, but masking continues to be an option for all residents who wish to do so. The City similarly lifted many restrictions for staff and the public on July 11.

The [Government of Saskatchewan COVID-19 website](#) states: “If you enter a facility that requires a mask, patrons must respect the decision of the business and either comply or choose not to visit the establishment. It is the choice of the individual business or facility to implement their own masking policy.”

### Current Status

The City of Saskatoon’s response to COVID-19 has been aligned with the direction coming from the Government of Canada and the Government of Saskatchewan. The City has also relied on the expertise of its local Saskatchewan Health Authority Saskatoon Medical Health Officers.

Since July 11, 2021, when the Government of Saskatchewan Public Health Orders were lifted, the following significant changes have occurred:

- The Assessed Risk of Community Transmission in Saskatoon changed from “COVID transmission is controlled, but there is a risk of community transmission” to “High risk that COVID transmission is not controlled.” See Appendix 1: “Assessed Risk of Epidemic Transmission.”
- On July 11, 2021 there were 59 active cases in Saskatoon. On August 28, 2021 there were 463 cases. This is an increase of 785% or 404 cases in 46 days.
- Dr. Jasmine Hasselback, Saskatoon Medical Health Officer, Area Department Lead, Public Health and Preventative Medicine (Health Protection, Health Surveillance, Disease and Injury Prevention, Population Health Assessment, Health Promotion, Emergency Preparedness and Response), Saskatchewan Health Authority has recommended: “Masking indoors in public places.” In addition, Dr. Hasselback shared this message on August 27<sup>th</sup> from the local Medical Health Officers:
  - “The COVID-19 situation in Saskatoon has escalated to an unprecedented rate from last week to this week. We are seeing pressures on our health system that are unsustainable. It is imperative that the entire community action all non-pharmaceutical public health measures that they can immediately.”
- The [Saskatoon Wastewater Data](#) has indicated increasing rates of COVID RNA in the Saskatoon wastewater. The last data, from August 12 – 17, 2021 indicated a 348% increase in the RNA viral load. This is the highest level that the wastewater data has indicated to date. Currently, all of the viral

RNA load in the Saskatoon wastewater is contributed by the Delta (B.1.617) variant.

Masks are currently welcomed but not required in all City facilities and while riding on Saskatoon Transit.

### **Public Engagement**

The Administration consulted with the Saskatchewan Health Authority in preparing this report. It did not conduct independent surveys or opinion polls on the potential of requiring masks to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

### **City of Saskatoon's Current Approach**

Since March 2020, when the first reported case of COVID-19 emerged in Saskatoon, the City has implemented various measures to prioritize the health and safety of residents and employees while continuing to provide civic services. In doing so, the City had to adapt quickly to find innovative ways to deliver core services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the lifting of the Provincial Public Health Orders the City has followed Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) and Business Continuity Process in managing the response to COVID-19 in our community. The City of Saskatoon does not currently have any formal requirements for the public to use face masks while accessing City services and facilities. Residents are welcomed to wear masks in City facilities and services if they choose to.

### **OPTIONS**

With respect to public health protocols, the City can assess and mitigate the COVID-19 hazard from a safety perspective using recommendations from the Government of Canada, the Government of Saskatchewan, and the standard "Hierarchy of Controls." The Hierarchy of Controls, shown in Appendix 2, is a 'best practice' approach to minimizing risk. The Administration, for example, utilized a Hierarchy of Controls when re-opening all City facilities and services.

The Hierarchy of Controls is also useful to help evaluate potential policy responses to minimize virus transmission. This hierarchy is as follows:

- The most effective method of protection from COVID-19 transmission is eliminating the risk of exposure by staying home;
- The second most effective method of protection is always substituting elimination by achieving physical distancing (2m);
- The next strategy for protection would be installing physical barriers between employees when physical distancing cannot be achieved and by ensuring ventilation systems are meeting ASHRAE recommendations
- The next strategy for protection would be changing the way we deliver services, through Administrative Procedures, such as pre-booking services and enhancing cleaning protocols; and

- The final method of protection when the above strategies cannot be achieved is to have everyone wear a face mask. It is important to note that a non-tightfitting mask is not personal protective equipment. Rather, it is a barrier to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission recommended by the Canadian Chief Medical Officer.

The Administration is presenting three options for City Council's consideration. These options are focused on strategies that could be implemented for City services and facilities only.

The options range from no formal face covering requirements (status-quo) to mandatory face covering requirements for all persons using or accessing in-person City facilities and services. The options apply specifically to members of the public who choose to access civic services. These options do not apply to City of Saskatoon staff providing services to the public in City facilities, as safety protocols for staff have already been developed and implemented following OH&S regulations and the Hierarchy of Controls.

Further, the application of these options apply only to those services that are directly under the control of the City Manager, as described in [The City Administration Bylaw, 2003](#). The options do not apply to services provided by the City's statutory boards or controlled corporations.

### **Option 1 Maintain the Status Quo**

This option proposes that the City continue with the status quo and make no formal resolution to require the public to wear face masks to access City facilities and services and while riding on Saskatoon Transit. Individuals would be left to use their own discretion to determine whether to wear a face mask. At this time those accessing City facilities and services and Saskatoon Transit are welcomed to wear a face mask.

### **Implications**

This option does not generate any additional financial, environmental or legal implications. However, it does generate some social or, more appropriately, public and employee health and safety implications in that it does not minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission, especially in situations where distancing requirements cannot be safely met.

### **Advantages:**

- No further implementation requirements; and
- No new financial costs.

### **Disadvantages:**

- Sub-optimal in terms of minimizing COVID-19 transmission risk. At this time the Saskatchewan Health Authority have indicated that masks should be used in indoor spaces due to the increasing rate of COVID activity in our community. The status quo does not follow this recommendation from our partners in the Saskatchewan Health Authority.

### **Option 2 Require the Use of Face Masks for Saskatoon Transit Users**

This option would require that all users of Saskatoon Transit wear a face mask while accessing its services. Specifically, this means face masks that cover the nose, mouth and chin are required when travelling in any Saskatoon Transit vehicle.

The implementation of this option aims to help Saskatoon Transit to safely operate full-seated loads on all fixed route and Access Transit buses. To assist users in adapting to this requirement, for two weeks the City could have available, at no charge, disposable masks. This option proposes that implementation occur on September 1, 2021.

Moreover, this option proposes to continue to recommend, but not require, the use of masks for those persons who access civic facilities that are covered in the scope of this report.

Because face masks may not work in all situations, there are exceptions to this requirement:

- Anyone with an underlying medical condition or disability which inhibits the ability to wear a face covering or anyone providing assistance to a person with an underlying medical condition or disability where the use of a non-medical face mask would hinder the provision of assistance;
- Person unable to place or remove a mask or face covering without assistance;
- Children under the age of 2 years of age; and
- First responders in an emergency.

### **Implications**

Administration estimates the cost of implementing this option is approximately \$12,700. The assumptions underlying this estimate are as follows: \$0.33/mask with a ridership of 5,500 individuals a day for 14 days with an estimate of 50% of the individuals having their own face mask.

This option does not generate any social or public health implications as it aligns with the Hierarchy of Controls. It also includes exclusions to those persons who may not be able to safely wear a non-medical face mask.

### **Advantages:**

- Reduces the risk of COVID-19 transmission for Transit customers;
- Relatively minimal costs to implement and support public safety; and
- Does not require additional staff or administrative processes to implement.

**Disadvantages:**

- This option only applies to Saskatoon Transit and does not provide protection to staff and residents using other City Facilities or Services.
- There will be no enforcement of this requirement. Without Provincial Public Health Orders there is no enforcement support available.

**Option 3 Require the Use of Non-Medical Face Masks in all City Facilities**

This option proposes to require the use of non-medical face masks for public access to all civic facilities. Like Option 2, this option would include required mask use for Saskatoon Transit. Unlike Option 2, it would also require the use of non-medical face masks in all civic facilities. The exceptions listed in Option 2 would also apply with this option.

The recommended implementation date for this option is September 1, 2021. Like Option 2, the City could provide, at no charge, disposable face masks for two weeks starting on the date of implementation.

**Implications**

If masks were provided for the first two weeks, the estimated cost of implementing this option is approximately \$23,100. It includes the estimates explained in Option 2 (\$12,700) for Saskatoon Transit, and is expanded to include the City Hall Lobby, Indoor Arenas, and all Indoor Leisure Centres and recreation facilities, adding an additional \$5,800.

The Administration estimates that 4,500 individuals per day take part in programs or services in these locations. It is estimated that 50% of individuals would have their own masks, and thus, the projected cost of masks for the two-week period would be \$10,400. (\$0.33/mask).

**Advantages:**

- Reduces the risk of COVID-19 transmission for all people accessing City of Saskatoon facilities;
- Relatively minimal costs to implement and support public safety; and
- Does not require additional staff or administrative processes to implement.

**Disadvantages:**

- There will be no support from Saskatoon Police Service or the province to enforce this requirement. Without Provincial Public Health Orders there is no external enforcement support available.

**RECOMMENDATION**

That City Council approve:

- That the Administration be directed to implement Option 3, Require the Use of Non-Medical Face Masks in all City Facilities, effective September 1, 2021.

## **RATIONALE**

Public health guidelines suggest that in cases where appropriate physical distancing cannot be maintained, the use of face masks is recommended to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Considering all factors including the revised recommendations of the Health Authority, the Administration recommends that masks be required for all persons accessing all City facilities and indoor City services, including Saskatoon Transit.

The City will focus on educating and informing the public of COVID-19 safety precautions and on the use of face masks. When the City implemented face mask requirements in August 2020, there was significant compliance from the public. If an individual does not have a mask, they will not be denied services by frontline City staff members.

The goal of this measure is to educate and support the users of our services, not to penalize them for occasionally not having a mask.

## **COMMUNICATION PLAN**

If the recommendation in this report is adopted by City Council, the Administration will implement a communication plan focusing on education and awareness regarding the requirement to use a face mask when accessing City facilities and indoor services and Saskatoon Transit. A news conference and news release to share information with residents through the local media will be held on August 31, 2021. Other elements will include onsite facility signage, digital media (saskatoon.ca, City's social media channels, email newsletters) and traditional (print). Complementary communications will directly target Saskatoon Transit customers (vehicle and bus stop signage, transit stakeholder groups, announcements, Transit app, etc.).

## **PUBLIC NOTICE**

Public Notice pursuant to Section 3 of Policy No. C01-021, Public Notice Policy, is not required.

## **APPENDICES**

1. Assessed Risk of Epidemic Transmission
2. Hierarchy of Controls

### **Report Approval**

Written by: Pamela Goulden-McLeod, Director Emergency Management  
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