

Framework for measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in Saskatoon

ISSUE

The emergence of the SARS CoV-2 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) resulted in several adjustments to the City of Saskatoon's Occupational Health and Safety and Business Continuity Plans. These adjustments followed the public health directions from the Government of Canada, the Government of Saskatchewan, and local medical health officers to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace and community.

COVID-19 transmission, now driven by the highly infectious Delta Variant of Concern (VOC), continues to affect the delivery of City programs and services and thus requires ongoing Health and Safety measures to limit the transmission of COVID-19 in the workplaces and community. To assist the Administration and City Council in making evidence-based decisions, the Administration is proposing a COVID risk mitigation framework that uses leading epidemiology statistics to inform how and when to impose or relax various risk mitigation measures within the City's legislative jurisdiction.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Governance and Priorities Committee recommend to City Council the approval of the proposed COVID-19 Mitigation Framework as proposed in Appendix 2.

BACKGROUND

On March 18, 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan declared a provincial State of Emergency, giving it broad powers to address the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the government, in consultation with the Chief Medical Health Officer, issued several public health orders in an attempt to mitigate the risk to Saskatchewan people by preventing transmission and protecting health care services. In compliance, the City of Saskatoon implemented several mitigation measures to prevent workplace and community transmission, while protecting essential program and service delivery.

For example, at its August 31, 2020 meeting City Council considered a [report](#) from the Administration recommending non-medical face coverings in City facilities. At the time, there was no provincial Public Health Order mandating the use of non-medical face masks in public places. Thus, City Council resolved in part

That Option 2 as outlined in the report of the Fire Chief dated August 24, 2020, be implemented such that:

- *Effective September 1, 2020, the City requires all users of Saskatoon Transit services wear a non-medical face mask; and*
- *Effective September 1, 2020, the City recommends that all persons accessing all City operated facilities and indoor City of Saskatoon services wear a non-medical face mask.*

At that same meeting, City Council unanimously supported a set of measures triggers to monitor COVID-19 transmission in Saskatoon. As resolved, in part, by City Council:

Therefore, be it resolved that the Administration report regularly to City Council or Governance and Priorities Committee on the status of COVID-19 within the Saskatoon Zone similar to that outlined in Appendix 3, and in particular when the status changes.

On July 11, 2021, the Government of Saskatchewan rescinded its COVID-19 State of Emergency Declaration and removed all existing public health orders. As a result, the City of Saskatoon relaxed some of its own COVID-19 risk mitigation measures, only having to reinstate many of them due to high virus transmission in Saskatoon.

On September 16, 2021, the Premier of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan's Chief Medical Health Officer announced the immediate imposition of a new Public Health Order, mandating the use of non-medical face masks in all public spaces effective September 17, 2021. Given this direction, the City of Saskatoon will be following the direction of that order.

Council and Committee meetings have been held virtually since March of 2020, and although a return to in-person meetings was contemplated to resume beginning in September of 2021, in response to increasing Covid numbers in the region the following resolution was passed at the August 23, 2021 GPC meeting:

That virtual/remote meetings resume until further notice – working with the Emergency Measures Organization and Saskatchewan Health Authority to determine when in-person meetings resume.

Based on current circumstances, it is not anticipated that a return to in-person meetings will occur until at least January of 2022. Administration will provide updates to Council as needed in order to plan for an eventual return. In response to questions raised regarding the current preregistration process required for members of the public to attend Public Hearings, Administration is investigating alternative methods which would allow for a more open ability for public to attend and make comment in these meetings. More information will be shared as details are finalized, with the intent to implement potential changes for the October 25, 2021 meeting, if feasible.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The City's response to COVID-19 is guided by federal and provincial public health direction. Specifically, the City's approach follows provincial public health orders and the advice from the local medical health officers employed by the Saskatchewan Health Authority. What can the City do to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the workplace and in the community, subject to legislative or jurisdictional constraints?

As shown in Appendix 1, many leading and lagging indicators show that Saskatoon and predominantly the northern half of the province are facing high rates of COVID-19 transmission. The question is what does this data mean? How does the City know

when to act by either increasing or relaxing its mitigation measures? What indicators should the City consider in implementing potential measures that have the potential to reduce virus transmission in the absence of any public health order or to fill gaps in any such orders?

Given those questions, the Administration is proposing a COVID-19 risk mitigation framework in Appendix 2, that includes both indicators and measures so that the City can use the best available data to inform its decision-making processes. Again, this framework is both complementary and supplementary to any provincial public health direction and focuses on mitigating transmission in city-owned facilities. It operates only in the absence of formal public health orders or to fill any potential gaps in such orders. It is used to inform business continuity, employee, and public safety plans.

The objective for this proposed framework is to help City employees and residents accessing City services and programs understand the current level of risk and the measures in place to mitigate the risk. It also aims to provide a degree of accountability to staff and residents accessing services by providing information on what will trigger a change in measures.

With that in mind, the primary indicators listed in Appendix 2 are the leading epidemiology statistics that can be easily calculated by the using available data. They were developed by consulting leading epidemiology journals and organizations and more importantly, with the guidance and consultation of the following stakeholders:

- Saskatchewan Health Authority Medical Health Officer
- The University of Saskatchewan Computational Epidemiology and Public Health Laboratory, Department of Computer Science

As such, the proposed framework includes four primary indicators:

- 7-Day average of weekly reported cases for every 100,000, persons. This indicator measures the intensity of COVID-19 transmission in a jurisdiction. Daily case data is noisy, so the 7-day average of new reported cases smooths that data. The per capita adjustment reflects the case intensity and helps to show transmission on a comparative perspective.
- 7-Day average of test positivity rate. This indicator is expressed as percentage and measures the number of positive reported cases relative to the number of reported COVID tests. To calculate this indicator, we take the 7-Day average of newly reported cases and divided it by the 7-Day average newly reported tests. According to the World Health Organization a test positivity rate of 5% or less indicates that the virus is under control. However, given the emergence of the Delta VOC, a test positivity rate of three percent or less may be needed for minimal risk.
- The effective reproduction rate (R_t). This indicator is defined as the mean number of secondary cases generated by a typical primary case at time “t” in a population, calculated for the whole period over a 5 or 7-day moving average.

When an R_t decreases below 1 for a given disease in a given place, disease spread slows and the epidemic has the potential to be controlled. An R_t above 1 indicates exponential growth of the virus. For example, an R_t of 1.1 suggests that 100 infected persons would infect another 110 persons.

- Vaccination rates of the total population. Now that vaccines are available, Saskatchewan and the Public Health Agency report various vaccination statistics. We now have vaccination numbers by age and health zone. Because cases are reported for the full population, this indicator measures vaccination rates, expressed as percentage for the entire population, although children under the age of 12 are ineligible for vaccinations.

The framework also includes some secondary (watching) indicators to monitor the impact that the COVID-19 may be having on the health care system and the community. For example, these secondary indicators include the wastewater effluent analysis, hospitalizations including intensive care patients, fatalities, and cases by age. These secondary indicators are not used in determining the corresponding measure to be implemented by the framework. .

As Appendix 2 shows, the indicators and measures are colour coded and based on a four-level risk assessment with green being a minor risk and red being critical risk. As the City moves up or down the risk continuum measures are added or subtracted. For example, as the City moves from yellow to orange, the yellow measures remain in place, but they are supplemented by the orange measures. If the indicators suggest that the risk is lower, then the orange measures would be removed and the yellow would remain. In other words:

- A rising risk level should lead to stronger measures;
- Measures for each risk level are flexible and proportionate to the risks involved;
- Core services should be available during all risk levels; and
- Regular monitoring and reporting of indicators of COVID-19 risk in Saskatoon.

The measures are based on Public Health recommendations and the Occupational Health and Safety Hierarchy of Controls (Appendix 3).

Based on the data in appendix 1 and using the indicators as outlined above the results show that Saskatoon would be at the High-Risk Orange Level. If the proposed framework is adopted, the Administration would report a weekly statistical analysis package of information on the primary and secondary indicators. The enactment of various measures in the framework would remain in place for at least 30 days and then be reviewed with City Council at its next regularly scheduled meeting.

Importantly, this framework respects the authority of the role of the City and the Province and acknowledges the areas of responsibility of each. In recognition of that, the measures are divided into three sections:

- City-operated facilities (see Appendix 4), programs and services
- Municipal
- Provincial requests

City-operated facilities, programs, and services

Here, staff and operational measures are adjusted based on the Hierarchy of Controls and the level of risk. Measures in this area align with Occupational Health and Safety and Business Continuity.

Saskatoon Transit is a critical service for many residents of Saskatoon. As a critical services Saskatoon Transit will be monitored and planned for separately from this framework. The safety of the riding public and staff are of paramount concern and Saskatoon Transit is following industry best practices regarding COVID-19 safety.

Municipal

Municipal measures align with processes and bylaws currently in place. These relate to special events, public gatherings, rentals and the declaration of a Local State of Emergency.

Provincial Requests

There are some measures that would require a formal request from City Council to the province and these requests would be made in consultation with the Saskatchewan Health Authority Saskatoon Medical Health Officer(s). In this case, the Mayor would write a letter on behalf of City Council to the Premier and relevant cabinet ministers asking for the implementation of measures within provincial jurisdiction.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications to the approval of the implementation of the indicators for monitoring COVID-19 risk and the framework for measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in Saskatoon.

Moving to the higher levels of the indicators (orange and red) would have financial implications.

NEXT STEPS

Administration will continue to monitor and report to City Council and City staff on a weekly basis with updates on the Indicators for Monitoring COVID-19 risk in Saskatoon and current risk level and corresponding measures. This information will also be shared on a weekly basis on the City website.

APPENDICES

1. A review of COVID-19 Statistics – Week ending September 15, 2021
2. Framework for measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in Saskatoon
3. Hierarchy of Controls
4. City-operated facilities included in this framework and facilities excluded from this framework

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