

Mandatory mask policy in North Hastings



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By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

On July 17 masks became mandatory in all indoor public spaces, as mandated by Hastings Prince Edward Public Health, to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Business owners already had to ensure physical distancing in their stores, adequate hand sanitizer for guests and hand washing stations for staff and screening practices for any staff or customer to ensure they're not sick. This new policy also has them ensure people do not enter their premises without a non-medicinal mask, and this mandate is being enforced in good faith for the time being. The goal is to achieve a high level of compliance with the new mask rule without having to resort to any penalties. However, if business owners and the public willfully disregard this new rule, fines can and will be enforced by HPEPH under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act.

Under this new mask rule, the only exemptions are if a person is under two years of age, is exempt for a health reason, or is exempt for a practical reason, like having a meal. Signage should be displayed prominently informing people of this new mask requirement. Best efforts are to be made for any others not wearing a mask. A verbal warning should be issued, although HPEPH stops at advising businesses to refuse service if people refuse to wear a mask.

Dr. Alexa Caturey, the acting medical officer of health with HPEPH, provided these instructions in a July 15 letter to local businesses, under the authority granted by the EMCPA and related regulations, specifically Ontario regulation 364/20-Rules for Areas in Stage 3, and it applies to all indoor public spaces.

In an audio message to business owners and the public on the HPEPH website, Dr. Caturay explained how wearing a non-medicinal face mask or a face covering is an additional preventative measure that when combined with infection control efforts will help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Dr. Caturay asks commercial establishments in the Hastings Prince Edward area to develop clear policies to reinforce mask usage in their premises. She says that HPEPH is committed to working with businesses, municipalities and the community to implement appropriate and proactive infection control measures to keep everyone safe. She stresses that while masks are important, their use with other infection control approaches like washing your hands, physical distancing and staying home when you're sick. She says that HPEPH expects that these new requirements will be applied in good faith and they are going to work over the coming weeks to help local businesses understand what these requirements are and how to put them into place effectively. More information and the appropriate signage can be found on the HPEPH website, hpepublichealth.ca, and can be accessed anytime by local business owners.

Emily Tubbs is a communications specialist with HPEPH, and says they are continuing to work with municipalities and other partners to support commercial establishments and enclosed indoor public spaces as they implement the mandatory face mask requirements.

“We are also providing ongoing instruction and clarification to support these new requirements. In particular, as related to acceptable and safe removal of face coverings in certain settings, such as at the gym or at indoor dining establishments, to help businesses and public spaces as they work to ensure compliance with public health expectations,” she says.

Tubbs says most questions or concerns they've gotten from the public have been related to the exemptions from face coverings, for people who cannot wear one for medical reasons. She says HPEPH emphasizes that they understand not everyone can wear a mask and they do not expect that individuals need to provide proof or be turned away from a business. HPEPH continues to ask for the cooperation of establishments and community members to carry out these instructions with respect and kindness.

“While most feedback about mandatory face coverings has been supportive, this is just one of the five fundamental infection control methods we continue to encourage. We are continuing to encourage all local residents, employers, and employees to respect requirements for physical distancing, wash their hands and high touch surfaces frequently, stay home if they are ill and get tested if they are concerned about exposure. Together with community and health care partners, all residents must continue to be vigilant and continue to take steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19,” she says.

At the Thrift Warehouse in Bancroft, co-manager Mary Ellen Coghlan says that it's been going really well and that nobody has been adamant about not wearing a mask since July 17.

“There's some that do have health issues, but even in those cases, from what I've seen they try to cover up, with a face shield. They're very receptive to it for the most part. People complain about not being able to breathe properly but there's never an argument. We have the same routine; masks required, hand sanitizer at the door. We haven't had anybody who's really irate for the most part. People already know. There might be the odd person we have to remind, but people seem to be receiving it well. I think they realize now it's just a way of life. It's just the way it has to be in order for us to function at a reasonable level and stay safe and continue to open and be out and about,” she says.

If people do object to the masks, Coghlan tells them she's just following guidelines set out by public health, it's nothing personal, and that she and the store have to follow these rules. She says that they also offer gloves for people who may be loathe to touch products that may have been touched by other patrons., calling it an extra special safety measure that they take to keep people safe.

“For the most part, everybody has been a champ!” she says. Cathy Anstey is the manager at the IDA Drug Mart in town, and she says the mandatory mask rule has gone amazingly well. “We're having no problems. We remind them if they forget, they run out and get it or they buy one or we give them one here in the store. We offer them for 75 cents but we're not arguing with them either if they can't or don't want to pay,” she says.

Anstey says that her store sells masks in singles, in five packs, in 10 packs and in 50 packs, and can be had in cloth or disposable. “Nobody's made a fuss. One person said, no, that's okay, I'll come back later, but that's all. So that was it. Nothing, we haven't had any problems,” she says.

Sue Davis works at McCaskie TV and Stereo, and thinks it's going well and that people are being quite respectful of the new mask rule. “Certain stores you want to go in no matter what. The odd customer doesn't know how to wear them, but that's okay, we tell them. I had one customer refuse to wear one and say they were going to Peterborough, but they have mandated masks now too. Even when people come in without a mask, they're okay with getting one. And one time, a customer came in without one and didn't have one at all, and I had extras and gave him one, which he gratefully took and wore here in the store. It's going to make everything go back to normal at some point. My stress level went right down when they said everyone had to wear a mask. And my boss has always been adamant they want their employees protected and if people aren't going to be respectful, that's not acceptable.

Davis thinks that people are stressed with having COVID-19 restrictions in their lives over the past several months and the new mask rule is one extra thing that may put them over the edge, and she thinks when customers do complain about the masks, it's probably not even that that made them mad in the first place.

‘But everything's under control, and everyone seems to be on board,’ she says.

Vintage on Hastings opened up on May 19 and is part of Hospice North Hastings, so manager Heather Brough, who is also the program coordinator at the hospice, says they're quite familiar with the health issues surrounding COVID-19.

‘We made masks mandatory right at the start. We wouldn't let anybody in without one. So, when they mandated it in Hastings, it actually made our lives easier. Because before that, people would open the door and ask, do I have to have a mask? And we said yes, and some people slammed the door and said they'd never shop here again. Where are they shopping now that it's mandated everywhere? Where are they getting their groceries?’ she asks.

Brough says they lost all that anger and indignation from some customers when the government mandated mask usage on July 17. The only exception Vintage on Hastings had to mandatory mask usage in their store since May were children under two years of age. Since they are mostly run by volunteers who are seniors, they weren't taking any chances.

‘So, we say let's get this covered, and over with and get on with our lives, but we need to do it right now. I'm an old nurse, so I'm all about the science, and with SARS and everything, you just don't know what can happen. We had all the safeguards in place from May 19; the sanitizer, the plexiglass at the cash register, the distancing and the masks,’ she says. ‘As a health professional, an old registered nurse I was, we're doing this new mask rule and the infection prevention measures, and we'll keep doing it and this is going to be the solution.’