

Idaho health board rejects regional mask, distancing order

December 16 2020, by Rebecca Boone

A proposed public health order that would have included a mask mandate for Idaho's most populated region was voted down on Tuesday as hundreds of protesters again gathered outside the Central District Health building in Boise.

A previous attempt to vote on the order—which would have mandated masks in public and required businesses to practice social distancing or face a misdemeanor—was abruptly halted last week at the request of Boise officials and police amid fears that protests were becoming too "intense." One board member had to rush out after rowdy protesters at her residence loudly played a clip featuring gunfire from the movie "Scarface" while her child was alone inside.

About 200 people gathered to protest at Central District Health on Tuesday, and police "were not involved in any events of significance," department spokeswoman Haley Williams wrote in an email. The protests appeared largely peaceful, and police didn't receive any reports of protesters gathering outside of [board members'](#) homes.

During the meeting, three board members from Elmore, Valley and Boise counties—the more rural counties in the region—all voted against the mask mandate, saying they had heard from constituents who were deeply opposed to the rule.

Three board members from Ada County—the most populated county in the state—were in favor of the mandate, noting that Boise-area hospitals

were reaching capacity because of an influx of COVID-19 patients, including many from neighboring counties.

Before the vote, Central District Health Director Russ Duke told board members the vast majority of public comment came from people in favor of the public health order, and many of those who opposed the order erroneously believed it would have forced businesses and schools to shut down.

"This order does not shut anything down," Duke told the board. "In fact, one of the desired outcomes for implementing the order is to keep businesses and our schools (from) having to shut down."

Health experts, including Dr. Ted Epperly, a [family physician](#) and board member, have said wearing masks, limiting gathering sizes and practicing [social distancing](#) can limit the spread of the [coronavirus](#) and help prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed.

More than 124,000 Idaho residents have been infected with the virus so far, according to numbers from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, and at least 1,214 people have died.

"We have already lost 300 people in our district to COVID-19, with 100 of those deaths occurring in the last 40 days," Duke told the board. "It's not getting better—it's getting worse."

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