



The Bay | Benicia Breaks with Solano County on Masks

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The Bay is a local news podcast about what's really going on here. We'll show you the messy and resilient culture of this place we call home, with help from Bay Area reporters, community leaders, and neighbors. The show is hosted by Devin Katayama, with new episodes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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Ericka Cruz Guevarra:

[00:00:00] I'm Erica Cruz Guevarra, and you're listening to The Bay, local news to keep you rooted.

[show jingle]

Ericka Cruz Guevarra:

Mask requirements are pretty common here in the Bay Area, except where I'm at in Solano County, but last week the city of Benicia decided to break away with the rest of the county by passing its own indoor mascot mandate.

Steve Young:

[00:00:23] If people had a different attitude about this thing, it would be done. We wouldn't be having this conversation. We wouldn't have people continuing to die all across the country. And it's making it so partisan and political is not in anybody's interest today.

ECG:

[00:00:41] What Benicia's decision says about Solano County's place in the Bay Area.

[music ends]

How would you describe Benicia within the context of the Bay Area?

Steve Young:

[00:00:59] Well, I think we are closely aligned with most of the Bay Area. We are relatively affluent when it comes to Solano County. And I think our social and political views are more in line with the rest of the Bay Area than they are with the rest of Solano County.

ECG:

[00:01:19] This is Benicia's Mayor Steve Young. I sat with him, masked up inside his office at City Hall.

Steve Young:

[00:01:27] If you look at the political leanings of those communities, you know, they voted for President Trump at a much higher rate and their elected officials, the supervisors that represent those districts, are much more conservative. So to get a massive mandate from Solano County would require them to change that position. And I sort of believe that they feel that what they're doing is consistent with what their constituents want to see.

Steve Young:

[00:02:01] We are seeing an increasing number of cases they have been going up at around, you know, 5 to 10 a week, which for a city our size is significant. And then the county wide numbers, of course, are spiking and the number of hospitalizations are spiking. And in Benicia, we have a pretty high vaccination rate, over 80 percent.

Steve Young:

And that's a testament, I think, to the fact that, you know, we are we are very concerned and we've got a a larger senior population than other places. And seniors, of course, are even more affected by it and more concerned about it.

ECG:

[00:02:45] [00:02:45] I want to go a couple of weeks back, kind of leading up to this decision when all of the other counties in the Bay Area except Solano County decided to reinstate their mask mandates. When did you start to consider reinstating the mask mandate here in Benicia?

Steve Young:

[00:03:04] Well, at about the same time, when I saw all the other counties doing this and the realization that it wasn't going to happen in so long that we were going to have to take action on our own.

ECG:

[00:03:21] And as you mentioned, this decision was made official the 24th at a city council meeting. What was that city council meeting like? How would you describe it?

Steve Young:

[00:03:31] You know, we tried to keep it not emotional, but this is an emotional issue.

Voices:

[00:03:36] Other countries are shutting down Australia, New Zealand and doing what needs to be done. The US has had 38 million total cases. When is enough enough?

Like I have started taking my business outside the county. If I have to bring my children with me because I don't want to bring them into an environment where I am concerned that there will be unvaccinated people.

But don't delay a vote to delay is really a vote for COVID.

I am just I fully support this massive mandate. I think it's the bare minimum that we can ask of people here.

Steve Young:

[00:04:17] Based on the public comment we received on Tuesday night. Which was, I would say, 80 percent in favor and maybe 20 percent opposed. And also the then that was sort of the written comments we received before the meeting. We received about 100 written comments.

Steve Young:

And I think that really represents a community consensus around this issue. And I think that made it a little easier for the council to make the decision to move forward. Yeah.

ECG:

[00:04:46] Yeah. Tell me about the decision City Council made. What did you and the city council essentially decide to do?

Steve Young:

[00:04:52] So we adopted a massive mandate for interior of public spaces in commercial and retail operations and government offices. So what that effectively means is that businesses are required to post signs prominently at the entrances and to the extent possible, make sure that all of their employees are masked while working and that their customers do the same.

And then there are exceptions for kids under four years old. There are exceptions for people with medical proven medical reasons that they cannot wear a mask. For churches it said that choirs were allowed religious ritual. You know, if you're doing a religious ritual like communion, then you could remove your mask, obviously, but otherwise you should have your mask on.

We're not going to be setting police up or responding to, you know, complaints that businesses are not following the ordinance because in the past, when it was a statewide mandate, then we could refer these kind of complaints to the county or to the state. But we have either a state or county wide mandate.

ECG:

[00:06:05] [00:06:05] Throughout the pandemic. As we've been talking about, Solano County has been an outlier on a couple of fronts, including the mask mandates. I'm curious if this decision was hard for you.

Steve Young:

[00:06:17] Well, it would certainly have been easier if Solano County was in line with the rest of the Bay Area. And when they weren't, you had to fight the argument that you're not doctors. And there is a public health officer who's telling you one thing and you're moving in a different direction. You know, what's your basis for doing so?

And so that made it a little more difficult. I would say we didn't necessarily have the the backing of the public health officer.

Steve Young:

We did have the backing of the Napa Solano Medical Society and a number of doctors and infectious disease specialists who called in to support doing this. So we we did have sort of a balance of of opinion. But he is the official medical person in the county.

In this case We're going to first invite Dr. Bela Matyas, who's the county public health director, to address us. Dr. Morris, thank you for joining us today.

Dr. Bela Matyas:

Good evening mayor being there, members of the council. I'll keep my comments brief.

Steve Young:

[00:07:20] He believes that the spread only happens in social situations and parties.

Dr. Bela Matyas:

[00:07:25] And I have indicated I'm never in data clearly show that the end of our public spaces in our public settings are not where disease spreads and that many would not be expected to be helpful here.

Steve Young:

[00:07:38] And in fairness, when he testified, he wasn't saying don't do it. He was saying, I'm not going to do it for the county. But but he did say, you know, if there is community consensus around doing this, I have no problem with it.

Dr. Bela Matyas:

[00:07:51] I don't have any opinion on the decision of Benicia to implement this mandate or not to implement this mandate. My responsibilities are countywide and there are several valid basis for making a decision of this nature. One of those is political if it is within the authority of the elected officials to make such a mandate. Then their decision is valid implementation of their authority. The other is consensus philosophy of the community. If you are in a community that shares with consensus a common view, a policy is and implementation of that policy in compliance with that view is a very appropriate basis for implementing a mandate.

Steve Young:

[00:08:31] Somebody asked me if I felt betrayed or it was a question of that, you know, a realization that northern Solano County is considerably more conservative than southern Solano County. And when we had the public health officer here Tuesday night, that was a point he was trying to make.

[music begins]

Dr. Bela Matyas:

[00:08:52] [00:08:52] I think that it's easy for Benicia to feel an association with the Bay Area, but I guarantee Dixon does not. And neither does Vacaville. Our county is not just a Bay Area county. It is also a greater Sacramento area. Central Valley county.

Steve Young:

[00:09:06] You know Vacaville and Fairfield are more culturally and politically aligned with the Central Valley and more Republican and more conservative parts of the state than the Bay Area and that southern Solano County, perhaps because we're closer to the rest of. The Bay Area is perceived as more liberal as the right word, but less conservative and certainly on this issue, perhaps more concerned about what kind of health and safety issues are tied to it.

Voices:

[00:09:45] What would you please call roll? Council member Carol? Yes...yes...yes...yes...yes I want to thank the council for the time put into this effort. I know it's been a long night, but it's an important thing that we're doing. And I think the community is also grateful for our work. Thank you all. And with that, I believe we are adjourned.

[music ends]

Steve Young:

[00:10:23] It was important to me that we get a unanimous vote and so there was some compromising in our deliberations in order to get everybody on board and receive that unanimous support.

ECG:

[00:10:35] Why was that important to you?

Steve Young:

[00:10:36] Well, I think it's important to show the community that the council is united on this issue and that they couldn't then pile on somebody who voted, you know, the different way. And there were plenty who were ready to do that. Social media has been abuzz with, you know, lots of discussion about this. And I think once we were able to make it unanimous, I don't want to say it cooled down a little bit, but it did sort of take it away from a focus on an individual councilperson. And, you know, if people are upset about it, they can be upset at me or the council as a whole. But they don't necessarily, you know, pick out a single council member.

[music begins]

ECG:

[00:11:27] What has the reception been from the community since?

Steve Young:

[00:11:30] I've gotten a lot of thank yous and I'm active on social media. So on social media, I've received a lot more thank yous than, you know, what the hell are you doing? But I certainly got my share of those as well. But just walking around town, I was like just this morning I was up at a coffee place and somebody stopped me and said, Are you the mayor? I said, Yeah. And I said, Well, thanks for doing what you did.

And that means a lot, you know, when you hear that kind of stuff from citizens who aren't necessarily active, but they certainly are paying attention.

[music ends]

ECG:

[00:12:08] What advice might you have for leaders of other cities who might feel like they're in the same position that you were and where you were to maybe make a decision that was against what the county was doing, but they maybe felt was right for their community?

Steve Young:

[00:12:23] I think they have to have a sense of where their community is on this issue. But if it's anything like Benicia, they're not going to say it is. But, you know, we were strongly in favor of our community, was strongly in favor of it. I think the other leaders have to, you know, gauge the sentiments of their community and balance that out with the clear scientific standards and benefits that come with mass.

And nobody wants to wear a mask. You know, it's not comfortable. It's not something that we're doing it because, you know, we're trying to dictate, you know, something from the government. But this is a matter of public health and safety. And I think the elected officials first obligation is to protect public health and safety. And to me, this was a step in that direction.

ECG:

[00:13:15] Thank you so much for your time this morning.

Steve Young:

[00:13:17] Appreciate you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you guys.

[show music]

ECG:

[00:13:26] Mayor Young says the city plans to reevaluate case numbers and whether the indoor masks mandate is still necessary in six weeks.

Steve Young:

[00:13:35] The last man took over a year, but we're doing it and it's going to be over a year? Well, we don't know. I mean, the virus will decide how long this is going to have to last.

ECG:

[00:13:46] Meanwhile, another Solano County city of Vallejo plans to consider its own resolution to require face coverings in all public buildings. Vallejo City Council will take this up tomorrow at 8:00 p.m.

This episode of *The Bay* was reported in the field and cut by the one and the only Devin Katayama, as will be his last episode with his fingerprints on it. Post-production work was done by me and our editor, Alan Montecillo. I'm Ericka Cruz Guevarra. Thanks for listening. Talk to you next time.

[music ends]

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