

Dear Members of the County Council:

I am a ten-year Montgomery County resident, a registered Democrat, vaccinated and boosted, with two young children. I love my neighborhood and many other things about the county, but I am also currently considering moving to Fairfax or elsewhere depending on how county governance trends in 2022 and beyond. Our response to COVID is one of my major considerations.

I have significant frustration with our recent COVID policies and the seemingly absolute lack of data-based decision-making that informs them. We have two years of data available at a county level throughout the US, yet seemingly nobody cares to investigate it and use it to improve our decision-making. I have tried to perform my own analysis, but if you have a statistician on hand and can review CDC and county-level data, that would be very helpful. You will see two things.

First, despite Montgomery having divergent mask policies from Fairfax, Howard, and Arlington since August, our death rate from the pandemic is worse than all three of those counties, all of which are similarly vaccinated. To me, this evidences both the effectiveness of the vaccines in preventing death from COVID and the ineffectiveness of our broad mask mandate that seemingly only serves to keep people away from the gym and keeps them wearing a mask from door to table at restaurants before they remove it. My children's school and other businesses and settings have their own mask requirements. These factors indicate that we don't need a broad mandate and that it clearly has not worked, based on the statistics and empirical evidence. Given its ineffectiveness versus the downsides such as potential impacts to businesses and the general happiness of residents, as well as diminished communication and warmth due to lack of face visibility, it seems to present a compelling case to discontinue the broad mask mandate. Those who wish to wear a mask would certainly still be free to do so.

Second, despite our county being 85%+ vaccinated, 40%+ boosted, and having a mask mandate, Omicron has spread nonetheless. The vaccine and booster surely prevented severe illness and death for some individuals, and I am a full supporter of vaccination, but it is difficult to say that it stopped the spread at all given that our case count and positivity rate tracked in line with surrounding counties having much lower vaccination rates. COVID also exists in animal hosts. These facts suggest that COVID will be permanent and will best be addressed with annual voluntary vaccines similar to the flu, and available surge capacity at hospitals during seasonal winter periods of increased spread. But the data does not suggest that a broad vaccine passport will benefit anybody, and it will only create further division and anger amongst unvaccinated individuals. Particularly now that the CDC has released a study citing that prior infection prevented subsequent COVID infection and hospitalization better than vaccinations during the Delta surge. Despite being a strong supporter of vaccination to prevent severe illness and death from infection and perhaps sometimes avoid infection altogether, this makes it clear to me that the science on vaccine protective durability vs. prior infection protective durability is still a work in progress. Note that my workplace and gym have both had a vaccine mandate since August. Given the various workplace, business, and school mandates, and our already-high vaccination rate, it certainly doesn't seem appropriate or necessary to make 100% of county residents show vaccine identification to eat at a restaurant, etc. for some indeterminate and discretionary period of time.

I would lastly point you to the presumed post-vaccination survival rate from COVID. This data is impossible for me to compile given lack of available data, but the overall % of COVID deaths in the county have been <0.1% of all residents, indicating 99.9% survival over a two-year period. Nearly 50% of those deaths have been in nursing homes and more than 87% of deaths have been in those aged 60 years and above. The vast majority of those deaths appear to have happened before vaccinations became available. There have been zero county COVID deaths in the 0-19 age group since the start of the pandemic. I don't provide this data to be callous, only to suggest that it be looked at and used to inform future decision-making, versus seemingly being ignored. For instance, perhaps a good COVID policy would be to go visit nursing homes and senior communities to encourage vaccination and boosters, versus seemingly ineffective and extremely burdensome policies like making 100% of the community at-large wear masks or show vaccine-related identification 100% of the time.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,  
Josh Rothenberg