



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on September 6, 2021

## New Hanover County, N.C., Board Passes Mask Mandate Against Public Outcry

As politically motivated fear of COVID spreads faster than the virus itself, mask mandates are popping up all over the country. And it is not just major metropolises seeing the heavy hand of government literally muzzling citizens. Wilmington, North Carolina — a coastal city tucked in-between the Atlantic and the Cape Fear River, with a population of just over 120,000 — now has a mask mandate with penalties that include misdemeanor charges and closure of businesses.

The original order was put in place by the Health Board, which is an unelected body appointed by the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners (Wilmington is in New Hanover County). It included language about incarceration in mental health hospitals. That language is not specifically present in [the version of the order](#) that was put in place after the required 10 days of public comment and an official public meeting of the commissioners. It appears that after hearing from the public, the commissioners decided to amend several parts of the mask mandate — but still passed it against much public criticism.

The public meeting has been described by media and others as “fractious,” “tense,” and “heated.” The vast majority of those who spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting were against the mandate. Many others were removed from the meeting either for refusing to wear a mask to the meeting or for being disruptive.

As MSN [reported](#):

Following a fractious public hearing Tuesday morning, the New Hanover County Health and Human Services Board voted unanimously to mandate face coverings be worn in all indoor public places within New Hanover County.

And:

Prior to the meeting, 1,687 comments were submitted by the public about the mandate.



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More were made during a 45-minute comment period during the meeting. Several anti-mask protesters were escorted out of the meeting by New Hanover County sheriff's deputies for being disruptive and for not wearing masks.

Many who opposed the mandate were not allowed to attend the meeting, since masking was a prerequisite to enter the building. Though the mandate itself allows certain "exceptions," the board specifically disallowed those "exceptions" for the public meeting, causing many to accuse the board of violating the very rule that was being voted on. Several in the crowd outside also accused the board of violating the rules for public meetings by requiring masks to gain entry.

Some wore a mask just long enough to get into the meeting, then promptly removed it. Many of them were escorted out by New Hanover County deputies. "They can't kick us all out," said one man as he was told to leave. "I say we all take our masks off right now."

Many of those who spoke in the meeting accused the board of putting on a dog and pony show, since it was obvious they had already made up their minds how they would vote. That the majority of those who spoke or commented online and via phone calls, e-mails, faxes, and letters were against the rule appears to have been irrelevant to the board. The rule was approved by a unanimous vote.

All that remains is for the board to try to enforce it.

Many residents of New Hanover County and Wilmington are divided over the issue. The lockdowns, masks, and other heavy-handed requirements last year caused many businesses in Wilmington to close for good. Some of those were small businesses that had been around for decades. This most recent round of COVID hysteria threatens to do even more damage to the economy and liberty of Wilmingtonians — and a concerted resistance is forming.

Local NBC affiliate WECT reported on the "mixed reaction" to the mandate. That [report](#) — published online during the period in between the proposal and the final vote — cited both people in favor of the mandate and against it. Derek Sellers told WECT that he will abide by the mandate, but sees it as a violation of the rights of individuals. "That does concern me because if you can mandate that, what other mandates can come down the pipe? So it's kind of a slippery slope," Sellers said. "We're a free country. This country — here, you're supposed to be allowed to do whatever you want to do, make your own decisions, your own choices as an adult. Live your life like you want to live it."

Another New Hanover County resident addressed the bait-and-switch tactic of officials telling people that widespread vaccination would mean a return to "normal." He said, "It's quite unfortunate because a lot of us got vaccinated due to the reason of like, 'hey, let's get the masks off.'" But with more than half of Wilmingtonians vaccinated, here they are again, putting the masks back on.

But that may not be the end of the story. Because many Wilmingtonians are refusing to go along. And many businesses — with the memory of last year still fresh in their minds — are not enforcing the requirement to wear masks. And the softened [language of the order](#) — which was done to give it a veneer of acceptability — may help along that resistance. After listing 12 "exceptions" — including "any medical condition or disability" that may involve "trouble breathing"; finding that wearing a mask "is impeding visibility to operate equipment or a vehicle"; or "participating in worship, religious, spiritual gatherings, funeral ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, and other activities constituting the exercise of First Amendment rights" — the order states, "Anyone who declines to wear a face covering for these reasons should not be required to produce documentation or any other proof of a condition."



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So, while the order proscribes penalties for giving “false statements” to “an education compliance officer” (no, that doesn’t sound Orwellian *at all*), the phrase “should not be required to produce documentation or any other proof of a condition” could easily be interpreted to mean that one could simply state that they are exempt based on one or more of the 12 exceptions, but that they decline to discuss it any further. No statement is not a false statement.

And that is the position many Wilmingtonians are taking. While mask usage is up since the passage of the mandate, it is still common to see Wilmingtonians go about with exposed faces. And it is common for businesses to let that happen without acting as the enforcement arm of the County.



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