

EAST BAY TIMES

COVID: Contra Costa supervisors catch flak for declaring misinformation about virus, vaccines a ‘public health crisis’

Health officer: County on track to drop indoor mask mandate by January

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Misinformation about COVID-19 and the vaccines developed to protect against it constitutes a “public health crisis,” the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors declared Tuesday, drawing a backlash from numerous residents.

In a statement they unanimously passed, the supervisors asserted the vaccines have met rigorous scientific standards and that skepticism about the danger posed by COVID-19 has “created a culture of mistrust” that undermines health officials’ efforts to bring the pandemic to an end.

Supervisor John Gioia, who introduced the statement with Supervisor Karen Mitchoff, invoked a quote commonly attributed to the late New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan: “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, not their own facts.”

The symbolic declaration is the county’s latest step to promote vaccination. Currently, 82% of county residents 12 and older are fully inoculated and earlier this month Contra Costa joined other Bay Area counties in [establishing criteria for lifting the indoor mask mandate](#) for those people.

Dr. Chris Farnitano, Contra Costa’s public health officer, said the county is on track to meet the first criteria by the end of this month. That involves reaching the moderate “yellow tier” of COVID-19 transmission as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The county could reach the other two criteria — which involve hospitalization and vaccination rates — by December or early January if current trends continue, Farnitano added.

Tuesday's meeting saw dozens of speakers blasting both the supervisors and the county's health officials for promoting the vaccines and labeling skeptical comments about them as misinformation.

Many suggested the board was infringing on their free speech rights by equating contrarian beliefs to false information.

"This policy has created two classes of people — vaccinated and unvaccinated," said Brock Wenbourne, a firefighter and paramedic with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District.

He said one of his coworkers may be fired for refusing to get vaccinated and bemoaned having to be regularly tested for the virus.

Other speakers questioned how far the definition of "misinformation" could be expanded to suit the supervisors' viewpoint, calling the declaration a "slippery slope."

The supervisors' statement points out that health officials, doctors and nurses have recommended the vaccines and contends that false information about them has led to eligible residents "declining to be inoculated, rejecting public health measures such as face coverings and physical distancing, and using unproven treatments."

Jason, a Hercules police officer who gave only his first name, called the statement a "direct attack on the First Amendment of the Constitution."

"Many years ago, the Earth being round was considered misinformation and the science was settled," Jason said. "We obviously know that not to be true."

Lindsey King, a county resident who called into Tuesday's meeting, said free speech is the "crux of a free society" and warned of political consequences for the supervisors.

"The unrooting of the rotten systems that pushed this agenda will be dealt with by legal actions and recalls," King said. "You can do this, but it will come back on you."

Gioia became heated at one point after a speaker, Jackie Cota, said the misinformation statement smacked of "borderline Brownshirt Nazism," a reference to the Nazi Party's paramilitary wing.

"This is disgusting, what you just said," Gioia snapped back, adding later that while Cota had the constitutional right to make the remark, "I have the right to call that disgraceful, disgusting, inappropriate... I can't let that go without a comment."

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