

**“Governor McKee was slow to the punch, but his mask mandate is reasonable for everyone”**

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If you piss everybody off a little bit, you're probably doing your job pretty well. That's a motto journalists have lived by for generations, but it can also be applied to politicians whose most-meaningful decisions usually involve nothing but bad options. That's the challenge Governor Dan McKee has been facing over the last several weeks as he mulled whether to reinstate an indoor mask mandate at a time when COVID-19 cases in Rhode Island are surging at an alarming rate.

The state announced another 1,126 new infections on Thursday, and there were 280 residents hospitalized with the virus. Rhode Island will soon hit 3,000 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, a figure that was almost impossible to imagine when everything seemed to be going right over the summer.

So McKee took action by announcing that masks will be required for all indoor venues with more than 250 people and patrons at businesses with capacities fewer than 250 will be required to prove that they're vaccinated or wear a mask. The new policy takes effect Dec. 20 and will be revisited in a month.

It's not a decision he wanted to make. You could see on his face and hear in his voice when he spoke to reporters at the State House that he wasn't enthusiastic about new mandates. But he listened to officials in his health department, discussed his options with some in the medical community, and yes, talked to the business community before coming to a final decision.

In other words, he did exactly what Gina Raimondo would have done if she was still in charge of the state. **That's not to say McKee has handled this perfectly. Was he slower to the punch than he should have been? Probably. Does it make sense to give places like malls an extra weekend of super spreading before they have to require masks? Not really.**

But he deserves credit for implementing a reasonable mask policy at a time when the governors of Connecticut and Massachusetts are punting those decisions to their local cities and towns. Mayor Charlie Lombardi runs North Providence really well, but I think significant decisions like this one should come from the top. Rhode Island is also in the process of securing a million rapid tests over the next few weeks, and state leaders are quickly moving from gently nudging residents to get their COVID-19 booster shots to strongly urging them to do so. And it's becoming crystal clear that you shouldn't call yourself fully vaccinated until you get the extra shot.

To be sure, McKee isn't going to win any new supporters from his announcement Thursday.

There are folks like me who think he needs to be more decisive. He loves to remind everyone that 95 percent of adults in Rhode Island have had at least one shot of the vaccine, and that's only slightly more than the number of adults who have his cell phone number and attempt to lobby him on everything, every day. That can be a problem.

There are Democratic rivals who have the luxury of criticizing everything McKee does from the sidelines and revisionist historians who pretend like Raimondo didn't worry about the business community at all when making difficult decisions during the pandemic.

And there are some Rhode Islanders who believe the government shouldn't be enacting mandates at all. They probably weren't going to vote for McKee before, and they're definitely not going to vote for him now.

One thing just about everyone shares in common is that we're all exhausted.

It's not the vaccine requirement for healthcare workers that is causing our hospitals to be stressed to the max. It's that we're about to enter year three of a health crisis that most of us could never envision.

We're all feeling that way – including McKee – and we're all doing the best we can to hold it together.

**No one is going to praise McKee for how he handled the new mask mandate. But we might end up thanking him later.**