

# The Modesto Bee

## Stanislaus County could lift one emergency declaration and change COVID-19 response

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Stanislaus County supervisors on Tuesday will consider ending a local emergency that was declared March 11, 2020, and helped county administrators respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The proposed board action would change administrative procedures but also would shift the focus of dealing with COVID-19, a contagious disease that has killed 1,565 county residents in almost two years.

The county will retain the local health emergency declared by county Public Health Officer Julie Vaishampayan in March 2020 after she concurred COVID-19 was an imminent threat to public health.

But COVID-19 disease management will shift from pandemic strategies to a focus that recognizes the virus “will likely reach endemic status in 2022,” the county staff report says.

Endemic status would mean COVID-19 is treated like flu illness or other contagious diseases that circulate in the community.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and California’s top health officials have talked about COVID-19 attaining endemic status, but it isn’t known when or if the state will modify its own disease strategy or when COVID-19 will change to endemic status. A state mandate requiring people to wear masks inside public places remains in effect until Feb. 15.

The county staff report for Tuesday’s board decision says most residents in Stanislaus County have a level of protection against COVID-19, an apparent reference to the 57 percent vaccination rate in the eligible county population (age 5 and older). The vaccination rate is 65 percent among residents age 18 and over, while 12 percent of younger adults, 26 percent of adults 50 to 64 and 40 percent of seniors 65 and older have received booster shots.

Protection from vaccines and booster shots is an important factor discussed in some studies into the less severe illness associated with the omicron variant of COVID-19, compared to previous strains.

Board Chairman Terry Withrow said Friday he hopes the action Tuesday will restore a sense of normalcy.

Withrow acknowledged that another variant of coronavirus could emerge and threaten public health in the county, but “we will cross that bridge when we get there,” he said.

“In the meantime, we need to get people back to living again and not just surviving,” Withrow said.

Withrow referred to a controversial study that claims lockdowns have had little or no effect on COVID-19 mortality but resulted in enormous economic and social costs. Steve Hanke, a scholar with the Cato Institute libertarian think tank, co-authored the “working paper” published in January by the Johns Hopkins Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health and the Study of Business Enterprise.

Supervisor Vito Chiesa did not return messages Friday to comment on the proposal. As the county revisits the emergency declaration, county public health has reported a rising death toll coinciding with the omicron variant that has dominated since early January. The county’s online dashboard reported 33 additional deaths from Wednesday to Friday of last week.

Daily updates have also reported a decline in the seven-day average case rate and a drop in hospitalizations to 225 on Friday, down from 292 in late January.

The county’s proposed shift in strategy this year outlines goals for protecting the health care system, increasing vaccination of residents vulnerable to COVID illness; maximizing in-person education for local students; improving access to outpatient treatments to avoid hospitalizations; ensuring that testing and appropriate masks are available; and making sure the public has information based on the evolving status of COVID-19. A county campaign this year would encourage high-risk individuals to connect with health care providers to get fully vaccinated or boosted against COVID-19.

The county would establish an advisory group of physicians or medical experts for input on vaccines and treatments. It would also encourage a return to health care providers being the source of treatment for COVID-19.

#### DECLARATION ENABLED RAPID DECISION-MAKING

Supervisors would terminate a local emergency declaration that allowed the county chief executive officer or other directors to make quick decisions during the crisis to obtain resources or receive assistance from state and federal agencies without getting Board of Supervisors approval.

County CEO Jody Hayes directed the Office of Emergency Services for the first nine months of the COVID-19 crisis and then the role was given to Sheriff Jeff Dirkse in December 2020.

If the Board of Supervisors calls an end to the local emergency Tuesday, Gov. Gavin Newsom’s state emergency proclamation, on March 4, 2020, still provides authority for county departments to operate services in support of community health and safety, the staff report says.

Vaishampayan’s declaration of a health emergency, which will remain in effect, helps to bolster the county’s response to COVID-19, makes the county eligible for reimbursements for the response and gives public health professionals the tools they need to combat COVID-19, the report says.