

Ottawa

Etches leaving masking decisions up to businesses

Medical officer of health encouraging businesses to use masks, but says a citywide mandate isn't necessary

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A sign in front of a clothing shop advises customers to wear a mask at the Bayshore Shopping Centre in Ottawa, on its first day open as part of Stage 2 of Ontario's plan to lift COVID-19 pandemic restrictions June 12, 2020. (Justin Tang/Canadian Press)

Ottawa's medical officer of health is encouraging businesses to reintroduce masking policies as COVID-19 cases rise, but says a citywide mandate isn't necessary.

[In her first statement since April](#), Dr. Vera Etches said businesses can lead by example to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 by reminding people to physically distance, providing hand sanitizer and requiring customers and staff to wear masks.

While the Omicron variant and its sub-variants are highly transmissible, Etches told CBC that mandates are not necessary since people aren't experiencing the same level of severe illness as they had during previous waves.

"We are in a different place in terms of immunity and our ability to handle this," Etches said, adding that young people who are vaccinated may not feel the need for increased public health measures but should consider those who are more at risk.

"There are immunocompromised people in the community. They need to go to the grocery store. They need to take transit."

Tough decision for businesses

CBC reached out to several local businesses that said they are unsure of how they will proceed and declined to be interviewed at this time.

Ryan Mallough, the vice-president of legislative affairs for Ontario with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, said it's not surprising that this decision will be a difficult one.

"This summer is the first normal one a lot [of businesses] are facing in two years, and to have to make a decision or determination that could possibly deter customers ... realistically, just small businesses are not in a position to do that," Mallough said.

Still, he said the fact that it's a choice and that Etches isn't recommending the city bring back mandates is a positive, though consumer confidence is still a concern.

"It's been two years of almost daily announcements where someone was coming out and saying even though things are open again, limit your interactions, essential trips only," he said.

"We want to make sure that people still feel comfortable going out whether that is masked or unmasked."

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