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SC lifting bans on concerts, sporting events, movie theaters, with limits on attendance

By Seanna Adcox sadcox@postandcourier.com, Jul 29, 2020

COLUMBIA — Concert halls, theaters and stadiums in South Carolina can reopen to a limited number of people starting Monday, when restaurants and bars can be punished for failing to follow safety rules, Gov. Henry McMaster said Wednesday.

The Republican governor also announced a mask mandate in all state buildings, beginning Aug. 5, and called on more city and county governments to pass their own requirements for face coverings. He still stopped short of a statewide mandate, saying it must come from local leaders because “one size does not fit all.” Nearly half of the state’s population is already under local mask ordinances, enacted by 80 local governments.

McMaster has pleaded for South Carolinians to wear masks but repeatedly declined to make it mandatory as COVID-19 cases climbed, calling it unenforceable. Asking local officials to pass their own — a change from passively saying it’s OK — should fill in the gaps, he said, rattling off a list of national retailers, pharmacies and groceries already requiring masks in all of their South Carolina stores.

He also emphatically told local authorities to enforce all restrictions, a stronger stance than his office has previously taken in saying they can if they want to, through power allowed in his emergency declarations.

“I want city councils, county councils and everyone in between to know” of the directive, he said, adding state law enforcement and regulatory officials can’t do it alone. “This is not an air war. This is a ground war. We need thousands of troops if it gets to that.”

The head of the state’s municipal association said a statewide mask mandate is still needed. “Local governments will continue to lead the fight against COVID-19,” said Todd Glover. But “we remain convinced a statewide mask requirement would eliminate confusion and be more effective in flattening the curve.”

Newly reopening

Venues newly allowed to reopen to customers include movie theaters, auditoriums, stadiums and performing arts centers. Those represent the last of the business restrictions not rolled back two months ago. However, they must keep capacity at 50 percent or 250 people, whichever is less.

“There will be more businesses open and operating safely than today,” McMaster said. But stadiums, festivals, racetracks and other places of mass gatherings can get an exception to the 50 percent occupancy rule if they can get a waiver from the Department of Commerce after proving they can safely accommodate more people. That could open the door for fans at college football at the University of South Carolina or Clemson University, or at high school football games.

“Everybody wants football and a lot of other things,” he said, and they can happen in a scaled-back scenario if organizers “go to Commerce, explain your

plan, how you're going to do it, promise you're going to, and if you don't, you'll be in trouble.

"We want those things to happen," he said. "It's a great part of South Carolina life, but we can't go back to normal yet." Outdoor events — such as Soda City Market held on Saturdays in downtown Columbia — which have already resumed will need to get the official nod of approval from Commerce, McMaster said.

Recommended restrictions from the White House's COVID-19 task force go further than McMaster's willing. They include closing down — not reopening — places of mass gatherings and late-night entertainment.

But McMaster said they've been shuttered since April, and the government can't force businesses to stay closed indefinitely. What's important is that they follow the now-enforced rules, he said. While indoor concerts and nightclubs have officially remained banned, organizers have gotten around the rules with outdoor events and [vagueness in state law](#).

Rules for restaurants

If restaurants and bars don't abide by recommendations-turned-mandates, owners face fines, jail time and the temporary loss of their alcohol license. McMaster had encouraged restaurants to sign up for a voluntary program meant to signify they're doing what they can to make dining safe. But starting Monday, the voluntary part ends.

That means requiring all employees to wear masks, spacing tables and bar stools at least 6 feet apart, not allowing people to congregate at the bar, and limiting tables to no more than eight people. Dine-in services must be kept at 50 percent capacity. [Those were suggestions](#) when McMaster allowed restaurants to

reopen their doors in May. Alcohol sales are still banned starting at 11 p.m., as per McMaster's orders three weeks ago.

He encouraged restaurants to continue signing up for the Palmetto Priority sticker to show customers they're doing what they should back in the kitchen, where diners can't see. As of Monday, more than 2,550 restaurants statewide had received that "good housekeeping seal of approval," he said.

The voluntary program, which involves an online sign-up overseen by the state's largest hospitality trade group, has been [criticized as ineffective](#).

"These limited restrictions are temporary, they are measured, and they are targeted towards what we know works," McMaster said. "These measures give South Carolina the best chance to slow the spread of the virus without shutting down the state's economy — which we cannot and will not do — as many continue to call for."

The only remaining restrictions are those involving visitation to nursing homes and assisted living centers, which remain locked down from visitors, as the virus preys on the elderly and those with underlying health conditions.

Of the 1,551 South Carolinians who have died of COVID-19 since March, two-thirds were 71 and older. People with heart disease, diabetes and lung diseases are among those most at risk, [according to data](#) from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control.

But it's by and large younger people who are spreading it, many without knowing they've contracted the coronavirus. Half of those who get it either have no symptoms at all, or they're so mild, they mistake it for allergies or something similar. People ages 21 to 40 make up nearly 40 percent of all South Carolinians

diagnosed with the virus since testing started in March, but just 1.5 percent of those who have died from it, [according to DHEC](#).

That's why wearing masks and social distancing outside of your home are so important, officials reiterated Wednesday.

"We can be in a completely different place in a relatively short period of time," said Dr. Linda Bell, the state's chief epidemiologist, who has encouraged mask mandates for weeks.