

**JEFF GOLDEN**  
**STATE SENATOR**  
DISTRICT 3



**OREGON STATE SENATE**

September 15, 2020

Governor Kate Brown  
Oregon State Capitol  
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Governor Brown,

First let me register my gratitude for your willingness to shoulder the staggeringly difficult task of leading Oregon through the COVID crisis, amplified and extended by the Delta variant in what must be extremely frustrating ways. More than a few times I've wondered what decisions I'd make if I were in your shoes. I almost never come up with clear answers.

I write to let you know of the enormous volume of email I've received from constituents in very strong opposition to vaccine mandates. They are a mix of form and individually-written emails, almost all coming from my district. My judgment is that they run the gamut from poorly-grounded, unreasoned fears to well-articulated and thought-provoking comments. Some are rooted in the premise that the sole value that should drive policy is individual liberty and, essentially, that nothing else of importance is at stake here. These are hard to read. They wholly miss the reality that personal rights have to be paired with robust responsibility to others for a contemporary society to thrive, or even survive. I can report that this shrill, one-dimensional perspective doesn't dominate the oppositional mail I'm receiving, but it's definitely in there.

I feel a responsibility to bring my constituents' extreme opposition to vaccine mandates, whether from Salem or Washington, D.C., to your attention before mandates are substantially expanded. While I've been continuously using television spots and my social media platform to urge people to get vaccinated, I share some of these reservations. I see our core challenge to be striking the best balance between two pre-eminent values in conflict: the right to autonomy over our medical decisions and our responsibility to the well-being of the community as a whole. Within that template, I see coercing injection of substances that people don't want to accept as an exceptionally high level of intrusion on personal rights (much higher than, say, mask mandates), so serious that it deserves consideration only if the relevant data is unmistakably clear, and we can have a high level of confidence it will produce the results we want. That's not my assessment of the current situation.

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Beyond the values consideration, I have a practical concern that the planned mandates will not increase vaccination rates. Based on what I hear from constituents, for every undecided person pushed to vaccination by a mandate, there is likely another one (or more) who will hunker down in refusal rather than surrender to supposed “tyranny,” when the Delta spread might otherwise nudge them to roll up their sleeve.

I am sure you’ve already reflected on everything I mention. And I frankly don’t have a lot in the way of alternative policies that haven’t been tried; my sense is that you’ve embraced mandates only after concluding that nothing else will work. I don’t think we can be sure of that, because the ground is shifting. As you’ve pointed out, the Delta variant has changed the game in critical ways. One of those is that some people who’ve been holding out for months have apparently chosen the vaccine in the past few weeks. We know that some people will never voluntarily vaccinate, but they may be considerably fewer in number than our total number of eligible and unvaccinated people. There’s no new magic bullet, but I believe a renewed emphasis on the most successful outreach efforts of the past eighteen months (whether ours or from other states), well informed by focus groups of unvaccinated Oregonians, could make a decisive difference as the landscape shifts.

I have been reluctant to speak out on this matter. Your nearly-impossible task is situated in an environment that resembles warfare, where any suggested course-correction, however nuanced, runs the risk of undermining your efforts and handing ammunition to especially irresponsible and malicious players in Oregon politics. But the message from my constituents has reached a point where silence feels negligent.

I’ll close by re-stating my appreciation for your commitment to the brutally hard task of leading through the pandemic, along with discomfort that I don’t have a more fleshed-out alternative to suggest. Based, once again, on input and conversations with my constituents, I’m deeply concerned about the civic strife that broadly expanded mandates could foster, and request every possible consideration of revising the path ahead. I would be pleased to offer additional thoughts on prospects and options ahead if asked.

With sincere respect and best wishes,

Jeff Golden, Senate District 3

cc: Senate President Peter Courtney  
Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner  
OHA Director Pat Allen