

HOT TOPIC #45: March 12, 2021

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders

I've Been Vaccinated – Now What? Also: A Look at the Road Ahead

To start, some information for and about those fortunate islanders who are now fully vaccinated:

[Recent CDC guidance for fully vaccinated individuals](#)

First off, this is remarkably clear and concise information from the CDC (bravo!). Secondly, this is only for FULLY vaccinated individuals (two weeks after your final dose). If you are fully vaccinated, you may:

- Visit indoors and unmasked with other vaccinated individuals.
- Visit indoors and unmasked with unvaccinated individuals, so long as they are from a single household and are not high-risk.
- Not have to quarantine if exposed to a COVID positive individual, so long as you are asymptomatic.

But even if you are vaccinated you still need to:

- Wear a mask in public spaces or when with more than one household of unvaccinated individuals.
- Be thoughtful about your decisions around travel.
- Avoid high risk situations – large groups, etc.
- Get tested if symptomatic.

As you might notice, these guidelines are walking a fine line. Basically, what they're saying is that they think COVID vaccines reduce spread enough that they're OK with allowing some limited exposure, but they don't really know for sure, so are hedging their bets and still being cautious.

One thing that won't change is this: until no one wears a mask, everyone wears a mask. It's that simple.

The second issue: what will 2021 look like in San Juan County in terms of case trends and allowed activities (spoiler alert: we're not sure).

As we consider the road ahead, the future of the COVID crisis hinges on five major unanswered questions:

1. Is a fourth wave of cases possible and if so, what impact will new variants and/or rapidly and dramatically loosening safety restrictions have on that wave?
2. What will the speed of the vaccination roll-out be? Will vaccine delivery continue to accelerate, and what percentage of people will choose to be unvaccinated?
3. What level of protection will vaccinations provide against variant strains of COVID?

4. To what degree will vaccinations limit the spread of COVID?

5. Once administered, how long will the vaccines remain effective?

Fortunately, we should be much closer to having solid answers for each of these questions in the next couple of months.

-In all likelihood, signs of a potential fourth surge will be visible by mid-April, quite possibly much sooner. The new variants should become the dominant strain of the disease over the next 3-6 weeks, and with drastically loosening safety guidelines in many locations, we'll soon know if there is another wave coming.

-The current forecast is that all Americans (over the age of 16) will be able to receive the vaccine by the end of May. If that holds true, we'll soon have a better sense of the number of people choosing to be unvaccinated.

-Every passing day gives scientists more data to evaluate regarding vaccine effectiveness. Signs point to current vaccinations successfully reducing the spread of COVID, but to what degree is unknown. It also appears that some variants reduce the effectiveness of vaccines, but again, specific details are unclear. Cases of infection post-vaccination, case transmission from vaccinated individuals, and other key metrics are being analyzed and will soon begin to better inform our understanding.

So, a best-case outcome would be that the May 30th timeline for vaccinations holds true. That we avoid a fourth wave through robust vaccinations and good decision making. That our vaccines work well enough against the variants to move us towards herd immunity. That the vaccines limit the spread of the disease in a significant way. And that the vaccines remain effective for a long time.

If these were all to come to pass, then we can look forward to coming months of steadily loosening restrictions, declining cases, and a slow but certain move towards normalcy.

That said, likely there are hurdles yet to clear. This is a classic case of hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.

What all of this means for the islands as we head into summer?

Bottom line: no one knows.

It is certainly possible that many things we're used to seeing and doing in the islands will be able to happen safely to some degree. It is likely there will still be restrictions of some kind on highest risk activities, but if things go well, this summer will feel very different from last summer.

The other possible outcome is very different of course. If more dangerous variants spread despite vaccinations, if large numbers of islanders choose to be unvaccinated, or if the vaccination effort stalls, then it is certainly possible that we're looking at a much less rosy picture.

All islanders, island businesses, and others should be moving cautiously forward with hope, but remaining fully aware that the situation could worsen quickly and dramatically.

Clearly this is a totally unsatisfying answer, but hopefully better understanding the uncertainties helps to better explain this delicate place we're in.

Hang in there folks.