

Las Vegas in ‘very tricky place’ after COVID warnings

By Richard N. Velotta and Colton Lochhead Las Vegas Review-Journal
July 16, 2021 - 5:04 pm

Tourism industry analysts say it’s going to be hard to put the genie back into the bottle when it comes to revamping health and safety regulations addressing COVID-19.

But at least one resort is requiring employees to wear masks indoors, regardless of whether they’ve been vaccinated.

When the Los Angeles County Health District recommended county residents avoid traveling to destinations with rising infections and stagnant vaccination rates as in Nevada, it put local resorts in a health-and-safety no man’s land.

“No industry has put more into the health and safety of its guests and staff than the gaming and hospitality industry,” said Brendan Bussmann, director of government affairs for Las Vegas-based Global Market Advisors.

‘In a very tricky place’

“Since the federal mask mandate was lifted back in May, it has been about the honor system and I think that needs to continue forward,” he said. “Vaccines and continued precautions are the keys to getting this under control and continuing the economic recovery.”

“We are in a very tricky place,” added Amanda Belarmino, an assistant professor at the William F. Harrah College of Hospitality at UNLV.

“On the one hand, our properties are following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines by not requiring masks, so they are following the science. Additionally, the data we have seen on the delta variant has indicated that those who are fully vaccinated will not develop COVID-19,” she said. “However, with the increase in the number of cases, it does make sense for there to be some return to masks.”

Belarmino acknowledged it would be hard for tourists and residents to go back to previous guidelines on facial coverings.

“I would recommend a middle-of-the-road approach where employees return to wearing masks, masks are available for customers, in the guest rooms and at the entrance, and consider a return to more visible cleaning standards,” she said. “I would love to see commercials with vaccinated casino employees encouraging others in the community to be vaccinated and to reach out to their doctors with any concerns so we can help prevent a new surge in cases.”

Venetian employees to wear masks indoors

Keith Salwoski, a spokesman for The Venetian, said that in response to the revised Southern Nevada Health District recommendations the company will now require that all employees, vaccinated or not, wear company-issued face masks while working in indoor spaces and in indoor areas where people congregate.

“In addition, we have revised our signs posted at public entrances to share this new SNHD recommendation,” he said. “Complimentary face masks are available to our guests at front desks, Grazie desks and concierge desks.”

MGM Resorts International hasn’t made any changes to its current mask policy, which is that employees and guests who are fully vaccinated are not required to wear masks.

“Masks continue to be available at all MGM properties, and we remain vigilant with our health and safety protocols. We are closely monitoring the situation and are continually evaluating policies based on the latest information and circumstances,” company spokesman Brian Ahern said.

Josh Swissman, founding partner of the Las Vegas-based Strategy Organization, said that because the health district is only making recommendations at this point, and not mandates, customers might see some variation on mask policies from company to company.

“Where we sit right now with the information we know, that’s the best approach, for each operator to evaluate their own situations,” Swissman said.

“It really comes down to what makes the customers feel comfortable,” he added.

‘Vaccination remains our best defense’

But Swissman echoed other analysts in banging the drum for those who have not gotten the vaccine to do so to help stave off any mask mandate or capacity restrictions amid worsening COVID infection rates.

“I think the bigger concern out there is that we’re having to revert back to these recommendations in the first place. The most important message that should be

shouted from the rooftops is that everyone who hasn't gotten vaccinated yet should do that," Swissman said.

Nevada Resort Association President Virginia Valentine said the new guidance from the health district "is an important reminder that masks are effective in reducing spread."

"Vaccination remains our best defense, and Nevada businesses including the resorts are working very hard to get their employees vaccinated. The resort industry will continue to comply with CDC guidance and all the state and local health and safety regulations," she added.

Bussmann said that while there are no mask mandates so far, resorts would be compelled to follow any that are announced because they would likely be enforced by the Nevada Gaming Control Board and companies won't want to face disciplinary action.

"While we will have to see if any government mandates come into play as the number of cases has risen, there needs to be a healthy balance between keeping the economy moving and not turning back," Bussmann said. That includes permitting the industry to continue focusing on the health and safety of guests and workers and "make their own determinations within their own enterprises. "

"We are still early on in the recovery and a potential setback with rising cases would limit our current trajectory," he said. "The meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions business is just starting to bounce back and we still need to bring back the international segment. At this point, it is about personal responsibility to keep this recovery pushing forward."

The Review-Journal is owned by the family of Dr. Miriam Adelson, the majority shareholder of Las Vegas Sands Corp. Las Vegas Sands owns and operates The Venetian and Palazzo.