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South Dakota Republicans scoff at mask mandate proposal

January 28, 2021

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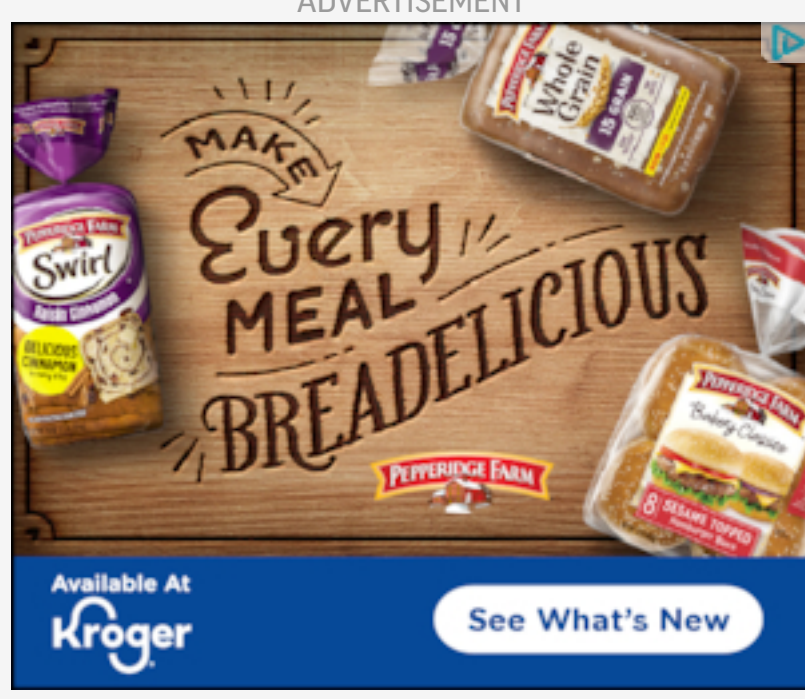
- Legislature
- Sioux Falls
- South Dakota
- Coronavirus pandemic

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Republicans who control the South Dakota Legislature shrugged off a Democratic proposal for a statewide mask requirement to slow the spread of the coronavirus, saying Thursday that they'd rather stay the course and allow individuals to decide for themselves whether to wear one in public.

House Republicans haven't even passed rules to wear masks on the close-quartered chamber floor.

"I'm not in favor of a mask mandate and I don't think that would have legs in the House," said Rep. Kent Peterson, the House majority leader.

Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba, of Sioux Falls, proposed requiring people statewide to wear masks. Several studies have found that coronavirus infections spread slower in communities that have mask mandates than in others that don't. And there is growing evidence, including from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that wearing masks helps prevent infections from spreading.



Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, though, has steadfastly refused to issue a mask order during the pandemic, instead relying on people to take personal responsibility for their safety.

Nikki Gronli, the vice chair of the state's Democratic Party, said Nesiba's bill mirrors Sioux Falls' ordinance, the *Argus Leader* reported. She said since Sioux Falls passed its mandate in November, it has seen a sharp decline in positive cases and hospitalizations.

The city reported 1,002 active cases on Wednesday, down 48 from the previous day. The three-day average of new cases is down nearly 33% since Jan. 14.

Top Republicans in the House and Senate, though, have praised Noem's mask stance.

"South Dakota was well-positioned from the outset to weather COVID as best we could, but the governor chose to flaunt our advantages of population and geography and promoted zero personal responsibility," Nesiba said. "Our economy has endured, thanks to our great local business owners and workers. What we need from the state is real leadership to prevent this virus from spreading."

Brookings, Vermillion, Yankton, Huron and seven of the state's nine reservations also have mask mandates.

South Dakota health officials on Thursday reported 24 new deaths due to the coronavirus, for a total of 58 fatalities in the last two days and 1,763 overall. The death count is the fifth highest per capita in the country, at about 200 deaths per 100,000 people, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University researchers.

Officials listed 187 new cases since Wednesday, pushing the state's pandemic total to 107,795.



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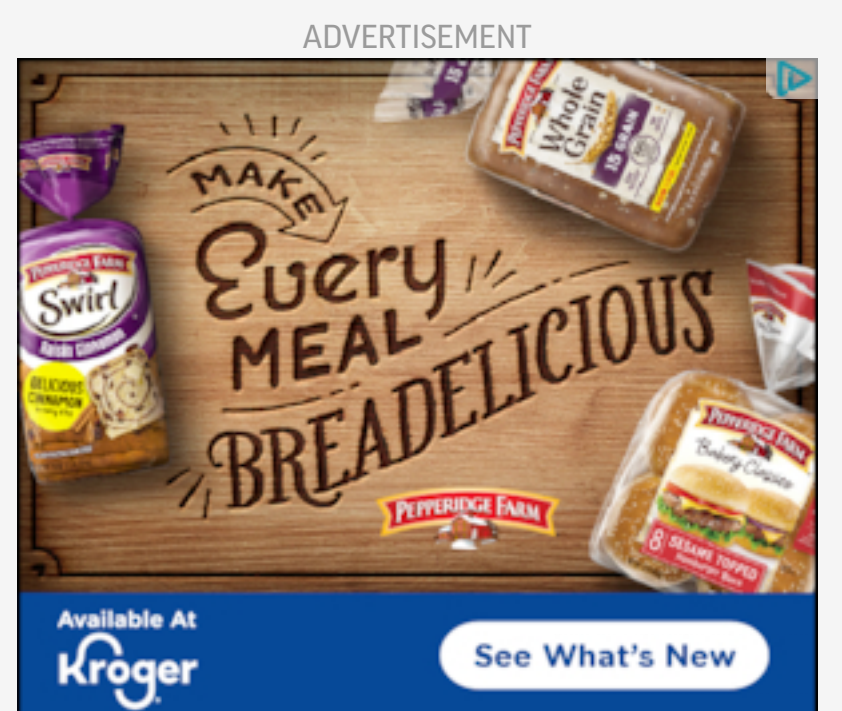


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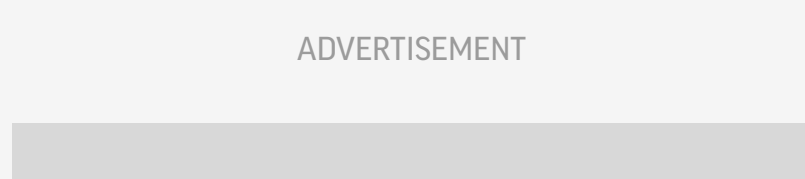
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