

Cantrell: New Orleans to remain in Phase 2, for now

By: Natalie Chandler, Editor September 10, 2020 1 Comment

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell said Thursday the city will remain in its current COVID-19 restrictions at this point. Her comments came hours after Gov. John Bel Edwards said the rest of the state will be advancing to Phase 3 restrictions on Friday.

Edwards said he would be providing specifics of the new rules on Friday. Asked later about his statement, Cantrell said she didn't have enough information to determine what it means for New Orleans.

The city, which saw an alarming surge in coronavirus cases in the spring, has been in Phase 2 since early June but with tighter restrictions than the rest of the state. Cantrell has repeatedly said her priority is making sure children can return to classrooms. The city's public schools are planning to open next week.

"Given no information about what Phase 3 will look like, it is difficult for me to respond," Cantrell said at a news conference with public school officials. "The city of New Orleans is in Phase 2, and we will remain in place and let the data drive (us.) Where the data has driven us today is to ensure our kids return to school starting next week."

Asked how she responds to bars in the French Quarter having to remain closed, Cantrell said, "It's tough. We are looking for a local solution to a federal problem here. This is a reality. The federal government has not been a real partner in this from the very beginning."

"Making our people whole, that is what I continue to focus on," Cantrell said. "Making all of our people whole, from the bars to the bartenders to all business owners. It's not fair to them. But looking at the local government to solve all of that, it's a false expectation. We have to continue to advocate and push for the resources we need here."

New Orleans banned to-go drinks this summer as photos of large crowds gathering on Bourbon Street circulated on social media and virus cases increased. The decision essentially shut down bars without food permits, and some have closed permanently since.

That hasn't stopped crowds on Bourbon Street, though, with more photos surfacing during the Labor Day weekend. Cantrell said she's looking into stricter measures, including issuing citations to people. She said there are other areas in the city where large gatherings also are an issue.

"When you see the levels of non-compliance, it forces us to take another level of action," she said.

CDC Phase 3 guidelines allow employers unrestricted staffing of worksites and let people resume visits to senior care facilities and hospitals. Large venues such as sporting venues, sit-down dining, movie theaters and places of worship can operate under limited physical distancing protocols. Gyms can remain open if they follow sanitation protocols, and bars may operate with increased occupancy.

States and local municipalities can use the guidelines to craft their own restrictions.

Edwards has been under increasing pressure from business groups and several parishes to loosen restrictions. Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes recently requested that they be allowed to move to Phase 3.



A man walks by the closed Tropical Isle Bar on Bourbon Street on July 14. A sharp increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations forced bars to shut down again just a month after they were allowed to partially reopen. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

He said Thursday that restrictions will not fully be lifted in his new order, and a statewide mandate to wear a face mask will remain in place.

The state has been in Phase 2 since early June, and Edwards' current order is set to expire Friday.

"This was probably the hardest decision I've made thus far based on all the activities going on in the state recently that could influence where we are two or three weeks from now that is not based on our data today," he said, referencing schools and colleges reopening, Hurricane Laura and the Labor Day weekend. "We are going to be somewhat anxious to get that data in and see what it does."

Edwards said Louisiana crossed the 155,000 mark on positive virus cases today, with nearly 5,000 deaths since the first case six months ago.

"My concern is that when you are going to the next phase, everybody assumes it means everything is OK," Edwards said. "Well, it's not OK. We are still No. 1 in the country in cases per capita."