



TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Lori Weigel & Kathryn Hahne / New Bridge Strategy

DATE: March 26, 2021

RE: Support for Local Health Boards and Public Health Officers

New Bridge Strategy recently completed a survey of voters throughout Montana to assess views of local boards of health and public health officers. The survey also gauged perceptions of policies that could affect the work of local boards of health in communities throughout the state.¹ The study found that more than two-thirds of Montana voters view local boards of health and the health officer system in their county as working well, and they trust those entities to make decisions regarding health concerns over elected officials by greater than a four-to-one margin. Above all else, Montanans say that it is important to preserve their local board of health and health officers' ability to make decisions quickly in time-sensitive situations and that those decisions should be based on the most up-to-date scientific information. This may be why they overwhelmingly reject taking away local authority to set standards and take actions to address local health situations and revoking health standards affecting local businesses that are already in place.

The specific key findings include:

- **A majority of Montana voters have a favorable impression of their local board of health or health officer, and a better impression of them than they hold for the State Legislature or their county commissioners.** Fully 52 percent say that they have a favorable impression of their "local board of health or health officer" while 26 percent hold an unfavorable impression. Those having a "very favorable" opinion is ten points higher than those holding a "very unfavorable" impression as well (15 percent).

Montanans hold an overall more positive impression of their local board of health or health officer than they do of the State legislature (49 percent favorable, 31 percent unfavorable) or their County Commissioners (47 percent favorable, 26 percent unfavorable).

- **More than two-thirds of Montana voters say that their local board of health system works well.** Knowing that not everyone would be familiar with their local boards of health (although only 8 percent

¹ **Methodology:** From March 9-12, New Bridge Strategy completed 500 live telephone interviews (landline and cell) statewide with voters throughout Montana. The sample was drawn proportionally throughout the state and is demographically and politically representative of the electorate. The margin of sampling error for the study is +/- 4.38% at the 95% confidence level; margins of error for population subgroups within the sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.

said they had never heard of them in the previous question), we provided a brief neutral explanation to explain the scope and manner in which decisions are made regarding local health situations, as follows: *“Local boards of health and health officers are appointed by city and county elected officials in that area to ensure independent decision-making that protects public health in that particular community. This could include adopting standards for handling food-borne illnesses, rodent infestations, sewer back-ups, second-hand smoke, or other policies that can affect public health. The boards are composed of community members, often doctors, nurses, or other professionals.”*

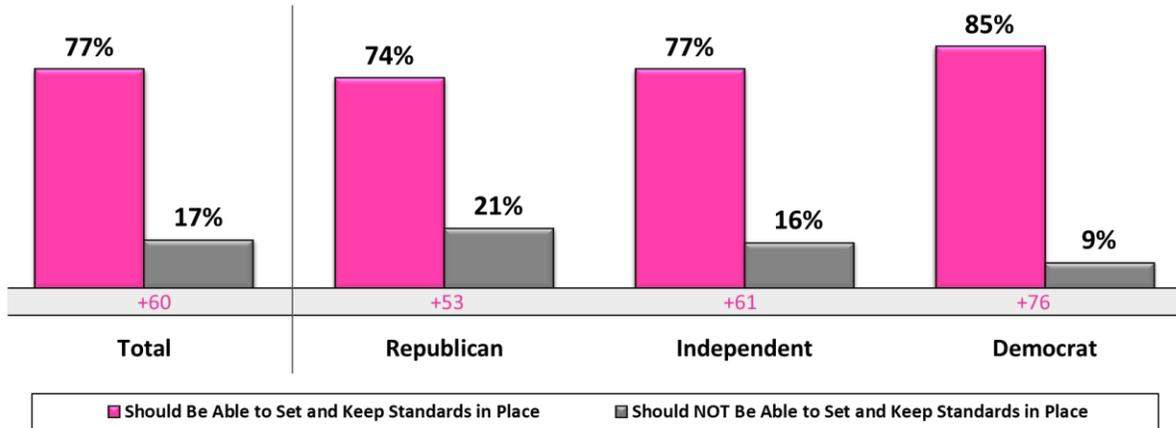
Again, more than two-thirds (69 percent) say that the local boards of health generally work well, while 22 percent feel they do not work well. More than 63 percent in every single region of the state say that the system works well, as do majorities of every sub-group we examined, including...

- 70% of men and 69% of women;
 - 61% of Republicans, 66% of independents, and 84% of Democrats;
 - 68 percent of those under 45, 67% of those 45-64 and fully 77% of seniors;
 - 73% in East/Central Montana and 67% in Western Montana; and,
 - 76% of those in cities or suburbs, 73% of small-town voters, and 61% of rural residents.
- **By more than a four-to-one margin, Montana voters say that when it comes to decisions regarding health concerns in their county, they would be more likely to trust decisions made by their local board of health, rather than elected officials.** While 70 percent place their trust in local boards of health, just 17 percent say they prefer elected officials to make those decisions. This consensus is overwhelming and evident throughout the state. A majority of every single sub-group we examined trusts local boards of health over elected officials, a dynamic that also extends across party lines. This preference may be why voters reject a number of specific policies to limit boards of health and health officers’ decision-making capabilities.
 - **More than two-thirds of Montana voters say that local boards of health and health officers should be able to set standards and take action to address local health situations without being subject to additional review and authorization.** Respondents were informed that *“currently, local boards of health can quickly respond to and adopt standards that address health situations, such as for food-borne illnesses or contaminated drinking water. There is a proposal in the State Legislature that would require them to obtain review by county and municipal governments and authorization by elected officials before they take any actions, potentially adding months to a response to a local health situation.”* The vast majority – 69 percent – prefer to maintain the status quo with local boards of health and health officers being able to independently address local health situations. Only 26 percent prefer that they be subject to additional authorization.

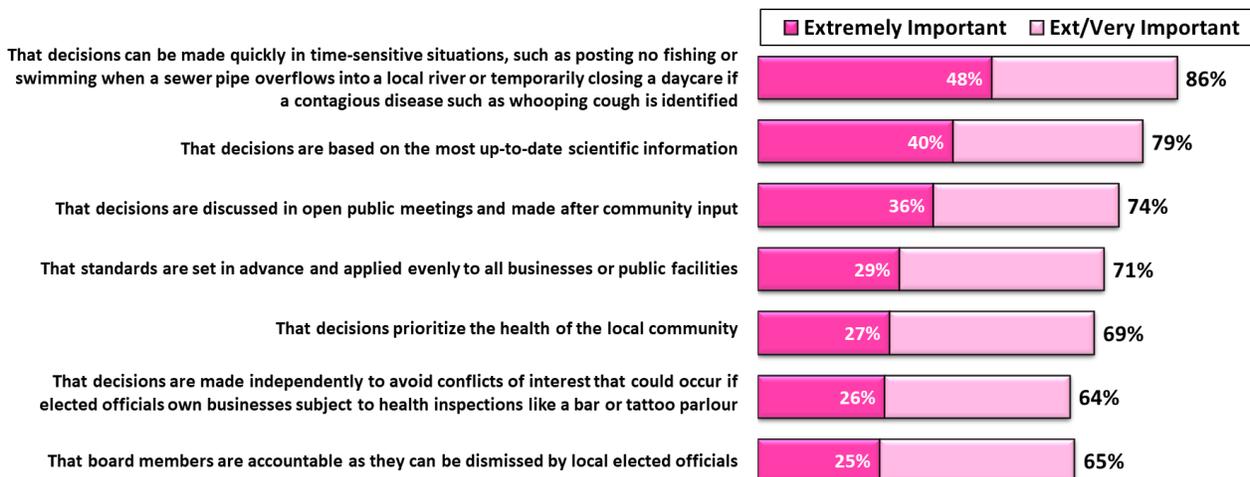
Women are more likely to want local boards of health to preserve their independent decision-making abilities (74 percent, compared to 64 percent of men), as are seniors in the state (76 percent, the highest of any age group). And while there are distinctions among partisan sub-groups, majorities of Republicans (54 percent), independents (71 percent) and Democrats (89 percent) all rejecting the call for additional authorization requirements on local boards of health and health officers.

Even more overwhelming is the rejection of a proposal that would ban local boards of health and health officers from setting standards and keeping some standards in place that affect businesses. Respondents were also asked to consider another proposal that *“would prevent communities and counties from putting in place new local health standards and get rid of some previous standards that affect local businesses, including such businesses as tattoo parlors, hotels, day cares, and restaurants.”*

More than three-quarters (77 percent) of Montana voters say that local communities should be able to set and keep standards in place for local businesses, while only 17 percent say they should not. Voters are adamant that communities should not have the ability to make these decisions taken away with solid majorities throughout the state and across party lines resoundingly in support of the status quo, as seen in the following graph:



- **The rejections of these proposals to limit independent public health decision-making are likely grounded in the view that a healthy economy is dependent on having health workers.** Nearly all Montana voters – a stunning 94 percent – agree with the statement that “a healthy economy depends on first having a healthy and productive workforce.” In fact, voters who rate the state economy as fair or poor right now are actually *more likely* to reject proposals that would require authorizations or limit local boards of health in taking actions to address health situations.
- **The rejection of these proposals is also likely due to the fact that Montana voters view it as very important to ensure decisions can be made quickly in time sensitive situation involving public health and that decisions are based on the most up-to-date scientific information.** Voters were asked to indicate how important a number of different factors are when it comes to how decision that protect public health can be made in Montana. The following chart illustrates that majorities see all of these as being extremely or very important to them personally, with more than nine-in-ten saying each one is at least somewhat important:



- **When given two viewpoints regarding potential proposals affecting local boards of health and health officers, voters continue to reject adding oversight by elected officials.** By nearly a two-to-one margin voters asked to choose between two different rationales continue to reject the idea that additional oversight is needed.

63% Some public health emergencies require prompt action to save lives – whether that is an outbreak of e-coli in a childcare facility or someone travelling into the state with ebola. Adding government red tape will only delay swift response.

...OR...

33% Unelected unaccountable boards of health have made decisions that over-reach and have hurt Montana’s economy while not saving lives. We need to make sure that there is oversight by elected officials.

In conclusion, Montanans hold favorable impressions of their local health boards and health officers and trust them more than elected officials to make decisions about health issues affecting their local community. They believe the current system is working well and want to preserve the ability for local health boards and health officers to quickly make time-sensitive decisions based on the latest science. Voters overwhelmingly reject proposals to require those decisions be subject to additional authorization or that decisions affecting businesses be prevented or removed.