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Delta Air Lines Inc., Southwest Airlines Co. and United Airlines Holdings Inc. — said they were dropping their mandates effective immediately. Use of masks will be optio

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Passengers on airplanes, trains and other public transportation in the U.S. don't have to wear masks anymore, after a federal judge struck down the mandate.

The five largest U.S. carriers — American Airlines Group Inc., Alaska Air Group Inc., Delta Air Lines Inc., Southwest Airlines Co. and United Airlines Holdings Inc. — said

they were dropping their mandates effective immediately. Use of masks will be

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place in February 2021. The ruling was handed down in a lawsuit filed last year by the Health Freedom Defense Fund, a nonprofit group that says it focuses on “bodily autonomy” as a human right.

“Today’s court decision means CDC’s public transportation masking order is not in effect at this time,” an administration official said in a statement. “Therefore, TSA will not enforce its Security Directives and Emergency Amendment requiring mask use on public transportation and transportation hubs at this time.”

JetBlue Airways Corp. did not reply to a request for comment.

United told employees they’ll be spared the task of forcing passengers to comply with CDC guidelines.

“This means that you are no longer required to wear a mask — and no longer have to enforce a mask requirement for most of the flying public,” the Chicago-based carrier said in a memo to staff.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki called the judge’s ruling “a disappointing decision” and said “we’re continuing to recommend that people wear masks” while the administration considers its legal options.

Prior to the TSA decision, some pilots said they were worried about the confusion being created by the judge’s ruling and CDC recommendations.

“We’re the kids looking at the two parents saying two different things,” said Dennis Tajer, a spokesman for the Allied Pilots Association, which represents American Airlines Group Inc. pilots. “We know it makes it very difficult. Our passengers are probably as confused as we are.”

Travelers on Monday said there were no apparent immediate changes. Everyone on

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It's not clear what impact the judge's ruling might have on state and local regulations that are based on CDC guidance.

Airlines for America, the lobbying group for the biggest U.S. carriers, and the Justice Department didn't immediately comment on the ruling. The CDC said it doesn't comment on litigation.

Mizelle, an appointee of former President Donald Trump, ruled that the CDC had incorrectly described the mask mandate as a form of "sanitation" to justify its authority in the matter.

"Wearing a mask cleans nothing," Mizelle wrote. "At most, it traps virus droplets. But it neither 'sanitizes' the person wearing the mask or 'sanitizes' the conveyance."

The judge also found that the CDC had gone too far by issuing a regulation that "acts on individuals directly" rather than just their "property interests."

"Since the mask mandate regulates an individual's behavior — wearing a mask — it imposes directly on liberty interests," she wrote.

The ruling comes as states across the U.S. have eased restrictions following an overall drop in case numbers from a January peak caused by the omicron variant of the coronavirus. Almost 1 million Americans have died of COVID in the past two years, and hundreds more continue to die every day.

"I feel very strongly the mask mandate should be lifted and individuals, including our own employees, make their own decisions and take personal accountability for their health on board our planes," Delta Air Lines Inc. Chief Executive Officer Ed Bastian said in a CNBC interview April 13. "Candidly, it's time to let the masks go."

CEOs from the largest U.S. airlines said in a letter to President Joe Biden last month

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it has eased fears of infection and helped the airlines bounce back after travel was decimated in the early days of the pandemic.

The CDC announced last week that it would extend the mask mandate by two weeks, to May 3, as it weighed data on COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations driven by the BA.2 subvariant. The extension was shorter than previous ones, signaling that the agency was nearing a position to lift the mandate altogether.

Florida and other Republican-led states in March filed a similar lawsuit seeking to overturn the mask mandate, a fight that pits Biden against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a fierce critic of pandemic mandates. The states accused the administration of ignoring “loss after loss” in court and having “outright disdain” for the limits of its power.

The Health Freedom Defense Fund, which filed the suit in April 2021, was founded by former Wall Street banker Leslie Manookian, described on the group’s website as a onetime Goldman Sachs Group Inc. employee who went on to become director of Alliance Capital in London.

Mizelle, formerly an attorney with Jones Day, was the eighth federal judge confirmed during the Trump administration to be rated “not qualified” by the American Bar Association based on experience.

The ABA typically requires a minimum of 12 years of experience to rate a nominee qualified. Mizelle was admitted to the Florida bar in September 2012. She was confirmed by the U.S. Senate 49-41 in November 2020.

Republicans have accused the ABA of being biased against conservatives. The case is Health Freedom Defense Fund v. Joseph Biden, 21-cv-1693, U.S. District Court, Middle District of Florida (Tampa).

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