

Bill Kaplan: Congressman Pocan and Speaker Vos lead on COVID-19

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Wisconsin Democratic Congressman Mark Pocan and GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos showed real leadership in doing a joint PSA for the Stop the COVID Spread coalition. Purists in both parties may decry the joint appearance, but as Vos said, the election is over. What the pair did was governing. They stressed that wearing masks, physical distancing and trying to stay at home are the only defense until we are all vaccinated. Not a minute too soon as a horrific COVID-19 winter looms.

The U.S. leads the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Nationally a cumulative 14.5+ million cases and approaching 300,000 deaths. Wisconsin staggers from a cumulative 400,000+ cases with near 4,000 deaths. Imminent availability of vaccines offers hope, but it will take months to manufacture, distribute and vaccinate all. So President-elect Joe Biden has urged all Americans to wear masks for 100 days to check the spread: "It's time to end the politicization of ... public health steps like mask wearing and social distancing."

Almost 40 states, including 13 GOP-led, have mask mandates. And, the American Hospital, American Medical and American Nurses Associations have jointly urged Americans to "help stop the spread of the virus (by) wearing a face mask" Moreover, the National Association of Manufacturers endorsed "Biden's encouragement for all Americans to wear face coverings." Finally, UW System President Tommy Thompson has made masks "mandatory on all UW campuses."

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Science is definitive. The CDC said: "Countywide mask mandates (in Kansas) appear

to have contributed to the mitigation of COVID-19 transmission in mandated counties” while COVID-19 increased in counties “without mask mandates.” It’s time for Vos to join 13 GOP governors, leading industrialists-CEOs and Tommy Thompson in supporting a mask mandate. Circumstances have changed dramatically for the worse. Importantly, Goldman Sachs said universal masking prevents economic shutdowns and could save \$ 1 trillion.

Right now economic fallout from the pandemic needs urgent bipartisan remedial action. The November jobs report indicates a stalled recovery, anemic job creation and rising long-term unemployment. Nationally 10 million jobs have been lost. “Wisconsin still hasn’t recovered more than 42 percent of the jobs it lost in April” (WPR). Worse, federal help for the unemployed ends the day after Christmas. 12 million Americans, including tens of thousands of Wisconsinites, will lose federal unemployment aid unless Congress acts. Meanwhile, “1 in 4 Americans with no work and children at home do not have enough to eat” (Washington Post).

Help may be on the way. A bipartisan Senate \$908 billion aid bill is gaining widespread support. It’s not perfect, but does much good: More financial support for small businesses, extension of unemployment benefits, state and local government aid, funding for schools, mass transit, food programs, housing assistance and vaccine distribution. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are talking.

One final point. A state reset is imperative. Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers and Vos should do a joint PSA urging mask wearing, physical distancing and no holiday parties or travel.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the *Wisconsin State Journal* from 1995 - 2009.