

Daniel Smith: Seasons change while challenges remain

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The veterinarian who tended my dairy herd years ago had sage advice when things were not going well on the farm – “Pull your hat down tight, and keep working.” Such wisdom stays in my mind these days as the summer of 2020 turns to fall.

We began the year optimistic that the five-year downturn in the agricultural economy was coming to an end. That optimism extended across our rural communities, to the stores on Main Street and to the cooperatives that serve as the foundation of our rural economy. How quickly change appears, in this case as a worldwide pandemic drastically altered our personal and professional lives while causing the most severe economic recession in 30 years.

I find myself using the same words over and over to describe the situation we are in today; words such as disruptive, unprecedented and uncertain. These words describe COVID-19's impact on our economy, schools, travel, business operations and daily life. They apply to all business sectors and parts of our population, urban and rural. None of us have been spared, and many of us have lost loved ones, jobs and security.

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It now falls to us to learn the lessons perhaps only a crisis can teach. Some estimate that as many as 35% of small businesses will permanently close as a result of the pandemic. Many of these businesses are in our rural communities, which were already struggling in the face of economic, social and cultural change. Agriculture and light manufacturing, along with the supply chain businesses that have long

supported them, have changed greatly over the past 40 years. Those changes have had a ripple effect on the rural population and economic structure of our farms and small towns.

After decades of challenges and change, in a time when our farm population is aging, small businesses are closing and the need for reinvestment in housing, education, health care, broadband and infrastructure is urgent, we must confront the impact of COVID-19 and plan a response. We must, as my wise veterinarian said, keep working.

The political stalemate in Madison, where months have gone by with virtually no legislative activity to address urgent issues, must be resolved. We must relearn the ability to debate policy, to develop programs, to plan for and build the type of social and economic structures that will sustain future generations. Somehow, we must step out from our ideological corners and come together on common ground.

There is no better time to start than with the national election in November. It is not my intent here to tell you how to vote, but rather, to implore you to vote. We owe it to those who came before us and to those who will come after. We hold the reins of democracy today. It is up to us, as citizens, to help create effective policies, to seek solutions with an open mind and to hold those in power accountable. If that sounds like work, well, that is exactly what it is.

We hear the word essential used repeatedly these days. What, and who, are essential? The pandemic revealed to us that essential work extends top to bottom, in nearly every industry, from food, to health care, to transportation, to civil service and beyond. But there are additional levels of essential work inherent in citizenship, in the support of the democratic process and our obligation to respect each other, regardless of race, religion, social status or political affiliation.

Over the coming weeks, the annual display of fall foliage will spread majestically across the Badger State. Unfortunately, it is one of the few constants 2020 offers as we make our way through these difficult times. So much of what we took for granted – school, sports, travel, large social events – have been cancelled or altered. But the vital work of citizenship in a democracy continues, more essential today than ever.

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