Bill Kaplan: Speaker Vos' foolhardiness vs. healthcare security

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The U.S. leads the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths, 26+ million and 440,000+ respectively. Wisconsin has 542,000+ cases and 5,900+ deaths. There is hope, vaccines are being administered, but it will take months for the Biden administration to ramp up production and distribution. In the interim, the American Hospital, Medical and Nurses Associations said: Americans can "help stop the spread of the virus (by) wearing a face mask … – allowing science and evidence to shape our decisions and inform our actions."

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said: "(The) main thing about the economy, is getting the pandemic under control, getting everyone vaccinated, getting people wearing masks … . That's the single most important growth policy that we can have." Moreover, the CDC reported that universal masking protects the mask wearer and the public. Masking is the bridge to prevent shutdowns until vaccination is completed.

However, Wisconsin GOP legislative leaders seem oblivious. Several weeks ago the GOP-led Senate and Democratic Governor Tony Evers compromised and agreed to a modest COVID-19 relief bill. But GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos blew it up, insisting that the bill be amended to include "poison pills" unacceptable to Evers. Senate Minority Leader Janet Bewley said: "Legislative Republicans take one step forward, and then three steps back." The GOP-led Senate also – alarmingly – voted to end Governor Evers' mask mandate. GOP Senator Rob Cowles dissented: "I think it's the wrong message. I'm coming from the science (and) healthcare point of view … ."

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It looked like Speaker Vos was going to pell-mell end the mask mandate. But Democratic Representative Evan Goyke, the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau and the MJS revealed that ending the mask mandate would cost Wisconsin about $50 million in federal food assistance for 243,000 Wisconsinites. It was the "gang that couldn't shoot straight." Vos paused, blaming the Senate and looking for a way out.

Vos should reconsider the human toll from ending universal masking, especially with increasingly contagious virus variants. GOP legislators from 7 states have died from COVID-19. MN GOP state Senator Jerry Relph died after attending a post-Election Day party, with most GOP legislators not wearing masks. NH GOP House Speaker Dick Hinch also died after attending a similar event. NH GOP Representative William Marsh, a retired doctor, said: "Those in our caucus who refused to take precautions are responsible for Dick Hinch's death."

Other conservatives get it. The National Association of Manufacturers and U.S. Chamber of Commerce support President Biden's mask mandate for interstate travel and on federal property. And, the Wisconsin Hospital Association and Medical Society support Governor Evers' mask mandate. Vos is at a crossroads – help govern or play to a narrowing base.

The pandemic demands healthcare security. President Biden is moving to extend coverage at a lower cost under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Heeding Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin he reopened the ACA private insurance marketplace to help jobless Americans. Over 100,000 Wisconsinites could gain coverage. That's the right road – healthcare security, including masking.

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