

Bill Kaplan: Vos has record of cynicism, incompetence in addressing COVID-19 pandemic

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The headlines are alarming: ““Americans feel virus whiplash” (Washington Post), “Omicron’s Spread Certain ...” (NYT), “Wisconsin reports highest one-day death count since January” (MJS) and “Rural Wisconsin hospitals ‘burning on the inside’ with COVID-19 surge” (Wisconsin State Journal). The consequences are horrifying: U.S. COVID-19 cases are over 50 million, approaching 950,000 in Wisconsin; U.S. deaths are past 800,000 including over 9,600 in Wisconsin.

Some state Republicans, such as UW System President Tommy Thompson, have risen heroically to control and end the pandemic. A master of persuasion, Thompson led a statewide campaign to successfully vaccinate UW students, faculty and staff on all campuses. He used UW resources to vaccinate state residents. And, Thompson wrote op-eds, held press conferences and rallies to promote vaccinations and correct misinformation. He proudly let Wisconsinites know he was fully vaccinated.

However, GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos has done the opposite. With the exception of one PSA in late 2020 supporting masking and social distancing, Vos has done nothing. He hobbled almost every attempt by Democratic Governor Tony Evers to control the pandemic. Worse, Vos became a purveyor of extreme partisanship, including downplaying the pandemic. In short, a record of studied cynicism and incompetence.

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In an interview with the MJS Vos finally let on that he was vaccinated, but not clear if he had 2 shots plus the necessary booster. No op-eds or public appearances to rebut misinformation and persuade the unvaccinated. Vos blames hospitals being overwhelmed by unvaccinated Wisconsinites infected with COVID-19 for supposedly losing staff because of vaccine mandates. However, the Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA) sharply disagreed: “Hospital vaccine policies are not what is causing nearly two years of COVID strain and stress on hospitals and their staffs.” Moreover, the WHA pointed out that less than 2 percent of staff have quit. And, Wisconsin Public Radio said: “Rural hospitals report losing 2 percent of workers over COVID-19 vaccine mandates” (Wisconsin Office of Rural Health).

Vos also told the MJS that the legislature could not do anything to respond to the new surge of COVID-19 cases or the 40 percent of Wisconsinites not vaccinated. Vos said: “I guess I kind of feel like what we recommended, which was people use their best judgment, was still the best answer.” He is clueless and oblivious to the ongoing toll and rising threat of variants.

The infectious delta and super-infectious omicron COVID-19 variants are circulating in Wisconsin. Why? Johns Hopkins Medicine explains: “The more people who are unvaccinated and infected, the more chances there are for mutations (variants) to occur. Limiting the spread of the virus through maintaining COVID-19 safeguards (mask wearing, physical distancing, practicing hand hygiene and getting vaccinated) gives the virus fewer chances to change. It also reduces the spread of more infectious variants if they do occur.” The American Medical Association and Wisconsin Medical Society strongly support this perspective.

Listen to doctors, not cynical, incompetent politicians. Get fully (2 shots) vaccinated and then the necessary booster. It’s the only way back to a normal safe future.

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