**For Release Wednesday, March 17, 2021**

**Capitol View
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**The Yearlong Month of March May Be Nearing an End**

Just when we thought the snow and ice and flooding of March 2019 would never end as the cleanup and economic impact lingered, we discovered March 2020. If you listen to the optimists, that yearlong month may be nearing an end.

In case you have repressed the memory, it was March 6, 2020, when Nebraskans first faced Covid-19, soon to become a worldwide pandemic, up close and personal. That’s when doctors at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha identified the virus in a woman who had returned from a trip out of state. It all played out from there.

There have been more than 2,200 Nebraska deaths among the 203,000 plus cases reported since we started keeping track. The United States has reported 29.1 million cases with more than 525,000 deaths. There have been 117 million cases worldwide and more than 2.6 million deaths. By the time you read this, those numbers will have changed.

But there is hope. Governor Pete Ricketts recently credited "Nebraska grit and generosity" for helping weather what appears to have been the worst of the storm. In an interview with veteran Lincoln newspaper reporter Don Walton, Ricketts said it was a visible sense of community as "everyone worked together" to confront the challenge. "Nebraska stepped up."

The pandemic forced last year’s session of the Nebraska Legislature to take a lengthy break. During that interim, the nation struggled with the senseless death of George Floyd, a black man, at the hands of Minneapolis Police in May. Nationwide protests touched Lincoln and Omaha as well. Heavy Covid death tolls in Nebraska’s meat packing plants added to mounting tensions as lawmakers eyed a return to Lincoln.

As predicted, discussions about policing and racial equality and crowded conditions in packing plants added to the pressure caused by the necessity of passing property tax relief.

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After several days of downright nasty rhetoric and allegations of backstabbing permeated the legislative chamber, the Speaker of the Legislature sent his colleagues home for a few days to cool off.

And then the powers that be decided to cancel college football while colleges struggled to set up remote learning and forced most people off campus. Football came back with a shortened season, lawmakers passed a Band Aid fix for the tax situation and talk about justice and packing plant workers was deferred to the next session.

Meanwhile, the death toll from the pandemic climbed. The CDC finally recommended that people wear facemasks, wash their hands and keep their distance in public. The Governor refused a statewide mask mandate, but Lincoln and Omaha and a number of other communities adopted them as part of their directed health measures. The Lincoln mayor and acting health director took heat for the mask mandate and because the health director was an interim. The council made her position official. An attempt to recall the mayor and members of the city council fell short of garnering the necessary signatures to force a vote.

I lost three friends to Covid and became one of more than 28,000 Lancaster County residents to contract the virus. What felt like a nasty combination of cold and flu was tested and found to be Covid. My doctor recommended I monitor my blood oxygen saturation level, which finally reached a danger level about a week later. My wife and I both received infusions of a monoclonal antibody, which came with a warning that we might feel worse before we got better. They were right.

Now there are vaccines. Getting mine has been delayed 90 days because of the infusion. But knowing it’s there has fueled optimism that we’re nearing the end of this yearlong month.

Ricketts said autumn might signal the return to some normalcy. Students back in their school classrooms.

Big crowds at the stadium for Husker football. "It sounds wonderfully normal," he told Walton.

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With that optimism comes the list of things that have sustained us through the year. Wear a facemask, try to maintain 6 feet of personal distance, avoid crowded indoor spaces, wash your hands frequently, get tested, quarantine if exposed.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 21 years.*