

WHY I WEAR A MASK



Eric Gerard, the author and candidate for Largo Commission, wearing a mask

Just in the past week, my wife Pat and I have heard about four people we know who have tested positive for COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the novel coronavirus. Two of the four are on ventilators as I write this. One is a woman in her 60's; the other a woman in her mid-30's.

As the infection rate rises – the current 13% positive test rate in Pinellas is roughly three times what it was before the state began phased reopening – I suspect it won't be long before every one of us, every single one of us, knows someone who has come down with this insidious disease.

Thankfully, the death rate remains flat. Doctors and hospitals are improving their treatment protocols, and patients are skewing younger. But the debilitating effects of COVID-19 are long-lasting, perhaps permanent. They include: a predisposition to blood clots, scarred lungs, and even diminished mental capability. Recovery is long and hard.

These facts are plain to see and simple to confirm.

While researchers and drug companies worldwide are working on a vaccine, which is the only real way out of this pandemic, there are three simple and easy things we can do right now to reduce the disease's transmission.

1. We can socially distance from people in public
2. We can wash our hands, a lot, for 20 seconds at a time, or use hand sanitizers when washing is not available
3. We can wear a face mask

These simple steps take nothing away from anyone. I do all three simply because I am a citizen and I care about other people.

Wearing a mask doesn't protect me; it protects you. Aerosol droplets from just our simple breathing carry the virus, and it can hang in still air for a very long time. That's just from normal respiration. If I sneeze without a mask on, it's like shooting a fire hose at you. I wear a mask whenever I'm in public to protect you from whatever my breath or sneeze may carry. As I just read the other day: I wouldn't sneeze into my hand and then offer to shake yours. It's the same thing.

Folks on the other side of this discussion may disagree, and may even claim that wearing a mask doesn't help, or is even dangerous to the wearer. To them, I say, with respect, that I'll rely on the CDC, people like Dr. Anthony Fauci, and our local doctors and hospitals, who have dedicated their entire careers to public health. They say – they implore us – to wear a mask.

I've heard people claim that government mandates to wear a mask violate their Constitutional rights. A vocal cadre, but not the majority, were up in arms last month when the Pinellas County Commission passed the mandatory mask ordinance. I accept that many are sincere in that belief. But when it comes to public health – and we are in the middle of an emergency – we all have to stand together, or we'll all fall separately.

And, by the way, mandatory mask ordinances or executive orders don't violate our rights. The law requires that I wear pants in public, and that's a lot less urgent to our health than a mask is today. You won't find a restaurant anywhere that doesn't lay down the law about: No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service.

Times are challenging. Nerves are frayed. Anger and contention come too easily about things over which we should all agree. How long are we talking about? Four months? Six months? Eight? Sooner or later, there will be a vaccine. Then we won't need a mask. In the meantime, designer masks are becoming more and more popular. You can even get a mask with your face printed on it!

Let's do this thing together. Let's all work as if we're one community, one city, one county, one region, one state, one nation. Let's move together and crush this disease that is spiraling out of control, killing people, ruining lives. After all, how hard is it to wear a mask?