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## Ramkumar: Seeing the good that can come from masking



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As schools and colleges begin to open, there is new normal in the shopping list — masks.

There is more good out of masking — safety and indeed opportunities for economic revival.

COVID-19 has genuinely raised the profile of items such as masks and hygiene products. When the pandemic was at its peak, lack of availability of surgical and respiratory masks exposed the vulnerability of our nation in a few sectors, as China has been controlling those markets. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has in fact rejuvenated interest and the need of the manufacturing sector.

Lubbock and Texas Tech have a long history of forward thinking by investing in research and education. This fact has gained great visibility in the present pandemic with Texas Tech having the state's first COVID-19 testing center, whose seed was sown way back in 1997 with the establishment of The Institute of Environmental and Human Health with renowned wildlife toxicologist Dr. Ronald Kendall as its founding director.

No one would have envisioned that at numerous major disaster, whether it was Hurricane Katrina, or the Gulf of Mexico oil spill or the COVID-19, the institute is at forefront. Investment some 23 years back in the R&D infrastructure is richly paying off with the development of critical technologies such as FiberTect wipe, establishing testing centers, attracting topnotch scientists and students from around the world to Lubbock—all contributing positively to the local economy.

The effort is a showcase of good partnership between town and gown, which again has become critical in controlling the pandemic. “This kind of partnership is exactly what is needed with COVID-19, which is a significant biological threat to our nation. COVID-19 has not only impacted our health and well-being as United States citizens, but it has also had enormous economic impacts on our economy and our financial well-being,” Kendall said.

COVID-19 among many of its negative effects has surely isolated societies and closed borders. However, this may turn out to be good as communities can focus on strategic strengths—this will surely lead to positive ripple effects. Stakeholders of this High Plains' cotton sector can collectively look for opportunities to take cotton beyond its traditional uses, such as medical clothing and hygiene products.

New and timely partnerships between manufacturing sector and research institutions are emerging due to the heightened awareness on masks and personnel protective equipment (PPE). It is pleasing to note that so many creative initiatives are happening in American living rooms and garages to come up with different designs of face-coverings. Such initiative will surely have ripple effect and spill into different sectors for the development of value-added products. America is not new to this—a revival will happen leading to growth in SMEs. A case in point is the grouping of scientists and public to create initiatives such as the West Texas 3D COVID-19 Relief Consortium. 3D printing, which has found its greater use in developing art and fashion products, is being fine-tuned to develop lifesaving and value-added products.

City businesses are managing the crisis by actively engaging with their customers and business organizations such as the Chambers of Commerce. “The only way we managed during the pandemic is due to our relationships with local businesses and help from the U.S. government. The local Chamber of Commerce has been a great resource,” said Steve Mofett, general manager of Lubbock Electric Company.

The importance of able representation for collective good— a vital aspect of the American way of life is shining in this time of crisis and stress. Chambers of Commerce and elected officials are taking extra steps to communicate with stakeholders and represent their views in making sound policies such as the passing of the CARES Act. In speaking about the collaborations and partnerships, Eddie McBride, president and CEO of the Lubbock Chamber of Commerce said, “Although far from over, this pandemic helped remind us that creativity and ingenuity along with working together brings out the best in people.”

As there are evidences that suggest that one mode of transport of the virus may be through airborne transmission, it is in the best interest of all that we use face-coverings. This sends a strong signal that we need investments in R&D, such as the one happening with the Operation Warp Speed initiative, reviving value-added manufacturing such as additive and sustainable techniques and more importantly, effectively working with town, gown and non-profit groups for the well-being of citizens.

While masks are necessary safety items, the necessity and need of once obscure items will surely revive sectors such as manufacturing, creating jobs and spearheading economic growth. Let us all practice social distancing, wear masks and be safe.

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