

6/23/2008 This Week in Congress

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June 23, 2008

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." On Thursday, the House passed additional funding legislation to provide for the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The same bill also placed a moratorium on six Medicaid regulations that would reduce services to seniors and people with disabilities. It also included money to help rebuild from the floods and tornados that hit the Midwest. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Addressing High Energy and Gas Prices

Kansans are frustrated by the cost of energy, including the high cost of gasoline. I support many proposals in Congress to address escalating prices, but these solutions are going nowhere until there is a collective will to do something about the energy crisis. The will does not currently exist because Republicans and Democrats are trying to posture themselves to deflect blame and capture political gains. I disagree with my colleagues and believe Members of Congress should be solution-minded, not partisan.

The energy challenge requires a diverse solution of developing all available energy resources. While the demand for energy has continued to increase over the years, there has been no significant change in our domestic supply. We must lift federal bans on oil and natural gas exploration in Alaska and off our coasts to increase our domestic supply.

Expanded production of domestic oil and natural gas resources alone cannot solve this problem. The solution must also include initiatives to support renewable energy such as solar, wind, geothermal, hydro-electric and nuclear power, as well as biofuels made in states like Kansas. Energy development must also be accompanied by energy conservation. We must encourage the development and construction of more efficient vehicles and buildings.

If we are to solve this nation's energy problem, Democrats and Republicans must work together to promote conservation, aggressively pursue forms of renewable energy, and develop domestic exploration and production of oil and natural gas.

[Click here to read more about my efforts.](#) You may also [click here to share your opinion through a poll on my Web site.](#)

Supporting Passage of 21st Century GI Bill

More than 60 years ago, Congress passed the first GI Bill to take care of our men and women who served in World War II. This week, I voted for passage of historic changes to modernize the GI Bill. The bill delivers enhanced education benefits to military veterans who have served since September 11, 2001.

The current Montgomery GI Bill is outdated and not meeting many of the needs of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly members of the Guard and Reserve. The new GI Bill will fully fund the cost of a four-year education by providing tuition and fees for enrollment in colleges, monthly housing payments and money for books and supplies. Veterans have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use the education benefits and those who stay in the military also have the option to transfer their benefits to their spouse and children.

Our soldiers are investing in our country through their service. It is our duty to invest in them by providing these overdue educational benefits. By providing an education, we in turn further invest in our families and communities. It was past time to increase the value of the educational benefit for those putting their lives on the line every day for our freedoms. [Click here to read more.](#)

Investigation Finds Tanker Decision Flawed, New Competition Needed

On Wednesday, an independent review by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) confirmed what many Kansans believed to be true since the Air Force announced its decision to award Northrop Grumman and Europe's EADS the contract to build the new fleet of refueling tankers. The GAO concluded that the Air Force's selection process was badly flawed and the competition should be redone to give Boeing a fair chance.

Since the tanker contract was awarded several months ago, every conversation I have had with Air Force officials raised more questions than were answered. I agree with this independent finding. The Air Force should follow the GAO's recommendation and reopen bidding.

Awarding this contract to Boeing would create thousands of American jobs, especially in Kansas. But the bigger question is whether we should even allow a foreign-subsidized company to bid for U.S. military work. While the GAO rejected the Air Force's process, Congress needs to address the broader issue of keeping manufacturing jobs in the United States. [Click here to view my remarks this week to the House of Representatives.](#)

Introducing Bill to Commend Honor Flight for Service to World War II Veterans

I introduced legislation this week that recognizes the Honor Flight volunteers and donors that make it possible for World War II veterans to visit the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. Many World War II veterans are now in their 80s and 90s and unable physically or financially to visit our nation's capital to see the memorial built in their honor. Honor Flight thanks these patriots for their service by organizing one-day, all-expenses paid trips to the capital.

I have had the honor of greeting veterans at the World War II Memorial who have traveled on Honor Flights. It is a very moving experience as they recount tales of their time in the service. You see the excitement in their eyes and many are moved to tears. The legislation I introduced expresses the House of Representatives' deepest appreciation to Honor Flight, its volunteers and donors and recognizes former Senator Bob Dole, a wounded veteran of World War II, for leading the fundraising campaign to build the Memorial and for his efforts to promote and support Honor Flight. [Click here](#) to read more and [click here](#) to view photos of Kansas veterans that have made the Honor Flight trip to our nation's capital.

Available to Assist Chapman Residents

Despite difficult circumstances, neighbors and friends are already coming together to begin the clean-up and rebuilding process in Chapman. My staff is available to help residents during the next several weeks and months as residents continue the clean-up and recovery process and begin rebuilding.

Monte Shadwick of my office has been in Chapman on multiple occasions this week and is available to assist area residents. He can be reached in the Salina office at 785-309-0572 where he can answer questions and provide recovery information. [Click here](#) for information about how to help victims of recent severe weather.

Social Security Administration Makes Progress on Disability Backlog

I recently received an update from the Social Security Administration (SSA) on the status of its effort to reduce the Social Security Disability claims backlog. In August 2007, the American Association of People with Disabilities released a report showing that Kansas had the greatest backlog of citizens waiting to receive a decision from SSA on the status of their disability benefits. Since that time, I have been working with SSA to make sure Kansans begin to receive the timely service they deserve.

The news from SSA is good but there is still a long way to go. SSA is hiring additional judges and staff to hear cases in Kansas and has reduced the number of pending cases in its Wichita office by 14 percent. There are also plans to open five additional hearing offices across the country. One of those offices is planned to be in Topeka, which will further speed up the rate at which cases are heard.

Visiting Kansas Communities

Jetmore: I was in Jetmore on Monday to visit with residents and update them on the latest congressional efforts in Washington, D.C. While in Jetmore, I stopped by the Courthouse, City Hall, Jetmore Lumber, the community's

newspaper, Hastings Realty, Farmers State Bank and Dodge City Co-Op. I also visited with County Attorney Kenton Gleason, local grocer Mark Welbrock and teacher Harmon Bliss. Like all Kansans, the residents of Jetmore take pride in their community and have done a great job of keeping the town looking its best.

Dodge City: After my visit to Jetmore, I drove south to Dodge City for a tour of Koch Nitrogen's fertilizer production plant and to learn how high fuel and other input costs are affecting Kansas businesses. High fuel and input prices are having a negative effect on all Kansans - from families to businesses. It was useful to hear firsthand how increased prices are affecting the fertilizer and agriculture industry. I also expressed my gratitude to Koch Nitrogen and Koch companies for their plans to build one of the first Habitat for Humanity homes in Greensburg. Koch Nitrogen donated \$65,000 to support the project. Hundreds of volunteers from Koch companies in Kansas will participate in the four week build. Thanks to Plant Manager Gary LeRock for arranging the visit.

Also while in Dodge City, I met with Mark Anderson of the Farm Credit Council. We talked about the availability of loans, the farm bill and the upcoming harvest.

Emporia: On Friday evening, I was in Emporia to attend the National Teachers Hall of Fame induction ceremony for five teachers from across the country. The Hall of Fame honors five of the nation's most outstanding educators each year. Congratulations to this year's inductees: Ronald J. Blanchard, earth science teacher at Ray D. Molo Middle School in Lake Charles, Louisiana; Kathleen Faye Engle, physical education teacher at Newcastle Middle School in Newcastle, Wyoming; Dr. Penny B. Ferguson, English teacher at Maryville High School in Maryville, Tennessee; Dr. David Lazerson, special education and music director at The Quest Center in Hollywood, Florida; and Suzanne Ransleben, English teacher at Carroll High School in Corpus Christi, Texas. It was good to see many local supporters at the event, including Emporia State University President Michael Lane and his wife, Peggy. Thanks to Jenny Harder, Director of Induction and Recognition; Glen Strickland, Director of Public Relations; and Stephanie Wade with the Hall of Fame for their efforts on behalf of teachers.

Council Grove: I participated in the Wah-Shun-Gah Days festival in Council Grove on Saturday by riding in the parade and visiting with folks who had come to enjoy the entertainment, food and crafts the festival featured. This annual event is named after the last full blooded Kaw Indian Chief, Chief Wah-Shun-Gah, and also includes a Pow Wow. I enjoyed the chance to visit with many Kansans. Thanks to David and Sharon Bayer for driving me in the parade. Also along for the ride were their grandchildren Tyler and Makayla Stone.

In the Office

Members of the Kansas Bankers Association were in to discuss the effects of government regulations on the banking community. In with the group were Machel Connally of Ellsworth, Jerry Fairbanks and Larry McCants of Goodland, Barney Horton of Atwood, Kendal Kay of Ashland, Robin Lackamp of Concordia, Steve Locke of Junction City, Dave Long of Cimarron, Earl McVicker of Hutchinson, Dick Nichols of McPherson, Frank Reifschneider of Garden City, Rick Smith of Buhler, Mike Stevens of Sublette, Jeff Van Dyke of Plainville and Doug Wareham of Topeka

Jim Kistler and John Stolte of Lawrence, Jerry Starkey and Russel Pucket of Kansas City and Rob Pitken of Overland Park were in with the Associated Builders and Contractors to advocate for increased investment in our nation's infrastructure. President Philip Kerstetter and Darrin Russell were in with Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina to tell me about their nursing program and of plans to improve the stadium facility. John Federico and Coleen Jennison of Topeka were in with the Kansas Cable Telecommunications Association to give me an update on their efforts to inform Kansans of the digital television transformation scheduled for next February.

Dennis Hupe of Topeka, Harold Kraus of Hays, Patrick Srin of Wright, Mel Davis of Merriam and Kenlon Johannes of Topeka were in with the Kansas Soybean Association to discuss issues affecting the biodiesel industry. John Schroepfel of Hutchinson was in with Bread for the World to talk about the federal government's role in hunger relief efforts around the world.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas President Andy Corbin and Sunee Mickle of Topeka were in to discuss ways to increase access to affordable health insurance. Michelle Sweeney of Topeka, David Wiebe of Olathe, Pete and Robert Zevenbergen of Kansas City, Walt Hill of Hays, Jessica Kaye of Newton and Anne Hodgdon of Mission were in with the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas to talk about the need for better access to mental health services for military veterans and their families. Larry Pitman of Topeka, CEO of the Kansas Foundation on Medical Care, discussed the importance of health care quality improvement in hospitals, nursing homes and health care clinics.

Kathy Wagner and Candee Stuchlick of Wichita, Vicki Worrell of Emporia, Sue Stinson of Shawnee and Kelly Cook of Liberal were in with the Kansas Association of Health and Physical Education to advocate for increased physical education in schools to prevent childhood obesity and decrease health care costs. Kansas University Dean of Education Dr. Rick Ginsberg of Lawrence was in to highlight the School of Education's successes and upcoming efforts to increase collaboration with other parts of the University.

Diane Forgy of Leawood was in with the National Limousine Association to tell me about the effects of airport fees on limousine companies. Gary Shorman of Hays was in with Eagle Communications to discuss the challenges currently facing the telecommunications industry. Greensburg City Manager Steve Hewitt was in to update me on the rebuilding efforts and progress taking place in Greensburg.

Several Kansans visited my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol, including Lindsay Olsen of Leawood, Shelby Gallion of Mahaska, Beth Wolfe of Marysville, Peggy Massey of Cedar Vale, David and Rebecca Graham of McPherson, Mike Boettcher and Joan Sauler of Dodge City, Krista Kucharik of Scott City, Mary Ann Hewitt of Overland Park and Austin Coverdell of Fort Scott. In from Wichita were Diane Loudon, Julie Wismer and Kathy Pfannenstiel. A large group of Kansas high school students were also in to see the Capitol with the Kansas Electric Cooperatives Youth Tour.

Very truly yours,

Jerry