

8/23/2004 This Week In Congress

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August 23, 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

I have spent much of August meeting with Kansans and visiting communities all across the "Big First," as Congress is in its annual district work period.

President Bush Announces Plans that may Benefit Fort Riley

On Monday, President Bush announced plans to shift, in one of the largest troop realignments since the end of the Cold War, between 60,000 and 70,000 soldiers and over 100,000 support personnel and family members from bases in Europe and Asia to bases within the United States. This move could include bringing the First Infantry Division back home from Germany to Fort Riley.

While the military has not yet announced the final destinations for the realignment, my conversations with military officials have been positive. Currently, the Fort has an economic impact of over \$550 million to the Kansas economy and an additional \$450 million in payroll with over \$6 million going to the Junction City and Manhattan school districts. If the Big Red One were to be returned to Fort Riley, the economic impact is expected to nearly double, and troop strength would rise from the current 11,600 to approximately 20,000 soldiers.

I will continue to work for the return of the First Infantry Division to Kansas.

Mourning The Loss of Three Fort Riley Soldiers

This week has been a difficult one for the Fort Riley community. It was announced that three soldiers, First Lieutenant Neil A. Santoriello of Verona, Pennsylvania; Sergeant Daniel M. Shepherd of Elyria, Ohio; and Sergeant David M. Heath of La Porte, Indiana, all stationed at Fort Riley, were killed while fighting in Operation Iraqi Freedom. This brings the number of Fort Riley soldiers killed to 41 out of over 4,600 Fort Riley soldiers who are currently deployed in Iraq.

Providing freedom to the Iraqi people has come at a high cost, but I have seen firsthand the good work that our soldiers are doing. However, today, our thoughts and prayers go out the loved ones of these soldiers. Their deaths serve as a reminder to the challenging and dangerous times that we find ourselves in today.

We mourn the loss of these soldiers and celebrate their lives. Each is a hero and none will be forgotten.

Supporting and Strengthening the Military and Military Families

On Friday, President Bush announced that he is proposing to increase the monthly education benefit for Reserve and National Guard soldiers so that they can take advantage of the additional money for education when they return home from their deployments. Currently, there are over 147,600 men and women serving in the Reserves and the National Guard who have been mobilized and are serving our country in the war effort. Reservists and members of the National Guard who have been continuously mobilized for more than 90 days, serving on or after September 11, 2001, will be eligible for this improved benefit.

Also, on Friday, the Department of Labor expanded the use of National Emergency Grant (NEG) funds to ensure that members of the National Guard and Reserve, who were required to interrupt their employment-related training or benefits due to a deployment, will have the option to complete their training upon returning home. The Department of Labor also expanded the use of NEG funds to the spouses of returning soldiers or the surviving spouses of military personnel who lost their lives while deployed.

It is critical that we take care of our military members and their families, especially during the ongoing war on terror.

Marysville Celebrates Opening of New Bridges

I was joined by officials from the Kansas Department of Transportation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Union Pacific Railroad and the city of Marysville to view the \$45 million overpass, railroad relocation and flood control project in Marysville. Later that day, the bridges on U.S. 77 and U.S. 36 were opened to the public. This marked an especially rewarding time for me because it was the first transportation project I worked on after arriving in Congress.

The project is nothing short of amazing in scope and represents years of work and planning. It is an example of what can be done when multiple parties work together to meet the needs of a community.

Currently, there are approximately 80 trains that pass through the Marysville daily, and prior to this project, the trains would cause significant delays and backups along the highways. However, with the relocation of the rail lines and the improved bridges, these traffic problems will be alleviated. I am pleased with the progress on this project and look forward to watching the community grow because of it.

Rooks County Free Fair Celebrates 125th Anniversary

This past week, I helped celebrate the 125th Anniversary of the Rooks County Free Fair. The celebration was marked by a giant birthday cake. It was good to see so many that had come out to celebrate the milestone for our county.

The anniversary was especially meaningful to me because I grew up participating in the fair.

On the Road in the Big First

The past week has allowed me to spend time visiting with Kansans in various communities across the state.

Seneca

On Monday, I traveled to Seneca. The visit allowed me to speak to the Seneca Lions Club and provide a Congressional update. Nemaha County was added to the Big First during reapportionment in 2002, and Seneca has been a welcomed addition to the district.

While talking to residents, I was able to discuss the Upper Black Vermillion Watershed project. The project covers over 117.3 acres that were donated by 6 landowners on a 10 year easement. The site contains a 54 acre sediment pool which drains 4.65 square miles and is expected to help alleviate flooding downstream, benefit local wildlife and reduce sediment deposits in the other major reservoirs.

Work on this project is critical for the local community, and I am working hard to get the resources approved for the completion of the Upper Black Vermillion prior to the expiration of the easement in March of 2005.

Barnes

On Tuesday, I visited Barnes and was able to stop by and see the great things that they are doing to ensure that their Main Street continues to prosper. While I was there, I visited the Post Office, The Mercantile, the bank and the local bakery.

The discussion focused on the rising cost of insurance and the need to become less dependent on foreign oil. These are concerns that I share and will continue to work on when Congress reconvenes after Labor Day.

Clay Center

I traveled to Clay Center and spoke to 60 Lions Club members and their guests and answered people's questions about the issues that they are facing. The conversations and questions mainly centered around medical issues, including the rising costs of medicine and the increasing cost of gas.

As you know, in rural Kansas we do a lot of traveling, and our livelihood depends on being able to get from one place to another at a reasonable cost. When our fixed operating costs increase (e.g. feed, fuel, insurance premiums) at the rate that they have been, nobody wins. I have become frustrated that the House has passed an energy bill twice only to become bogged down in the Senate.

Americans need and deserve a reasonable energy policy that keeps costs down while reducing our dependence on foreign oil. I look forward to going back to Washington, D.C. and working again to try to get a comprehensive energy policy passed in time to help Kansans.

Salina

This week I was in Salina and was able to sit down with Gerald Cook, President of the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce, and discuss the issues that are facing the business community.

While I was in Salina, I participated in a local public access television show with host Carol Clark, to discuss some of the major issues facing Congress. Shows like this are important because they allow me to inform residents about what is occurring in Washington, D.C. and how it impacts them locally. I applaud the efforts of the volunteers and staff of Salina Community Access Television for providing a crucial service to the Salina community.

Economic Development for the First District

This was a great week for economic development within the first district. On Wednesday, I was in Abilene for a groundbreaking ceremony for Great Plains Manufacturing Corporation. The groundbreaking marks the beginning of a \$5 million, 71,000 square foot expansion to the existing 119,000 square foot facility. Currently, Great Plains is the third largest employer in the Abilene area with over 129 employees and plans to add an additional six full-time positions.

The expansion will give Great Plains additional area for welding, and the company will add a state-of-the art powder paint facility that will include three separate booths, pre-paint wash system and oven. This project is a positive step forward for the company and for the Abilene community.

On Friday, I attended another encouraging economic development event. I was on hand to help with the grand opening of UPU Industries in Junction City. The company is housed in a new 100,000 square foot facility that will initially employ 40 workers, with that number increasing to 76 once the facility is running at full capacity. UPU is an international company that is the world's leading plastics manufacturer, specializing in plastic casings that are used for various agriculture purposes.

Disaster Assistance Approved for 47 Counties in the 'Big First'

USDA Secretary Ann Veneman announced that 47 Kansas counties have been given disaster declarations due to the production losses that were caused by the freezing conditions that occurred on April 7, 2004, through May 15, 2004 and by the drought conditions that occurred from January 1, 2004 to the current date.

The counties that were given disaster declarations were Barton, Cheyenne, Cloud, Decatur, Edwards, Ellis, Ellsworth, Finney, Ford, Gove, Graham, Grant, Gray, Greeley, Hamilton, Haskell, Hodgeman, Jewell, Kearney, Lane, Lincoln, Logan, Meade, Mitchell, Morton, Ness, Norton, Osborne, Ottawa, Pawnee, Phillips, Rawlins, Republic, Rooks, Rush, Russell, Scott, Seward, Sheridan, Sherman, Smith, Stanton, Stevens, Thomas, Trego, Wallace and Wichita Counties.

The designation will make farmers and ranchers within the affected counties eligible to apply for low-interest emergency loans from the Farm Service Agency. While this designation will not be able to help all producers, it will provide some assistance during these difficult times.

In the Office

This week Bryan and Janette Hess of McPherson stopped by my office for a tour of the Capitol.

Very truly yours,

Jerry