

10/15/2007 This Week in Congress

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October 15, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." The House of Representatives' work was cut short this week in observance of Columbus Day and to allow Members of Congress to attend the funeral service of Congresswoman Jo Ann Davis of Virginia. Congresswoman Davis passed away on October 6 after losing her battle with breast cancer. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Fighting to Protect Taxpayer Dollars

I continued pushing House leaders this week to enact needed reforms to the congressional earmarking process. Congressman Jeff Flake of Arizona and I introduced legislation that stops any bill that includes an earmark until we get the process right.

House leadership is currently prohibiting Members of Congress from both parties from challenging funding requests for home state projects in certain types of legislation. My belief is that any part of a bill that spends taxpayer money should be open to debate and question. The legislation I sponsored would suspend voting on any bill that contains an earmark until a bipartisan commission is established and makes recommendations to improve the process.

Congress must remember that the money we spend belongs to hardworking Americans. We have a responsibility to spend it wisely and a right to know where money is being directed. It is my hope that by bringing accountability to the earmark process, we can reduce overall government spending and the likelihood of political corruption.

Veterans Affairs Committee Hears from the Disability Benefits Commission

On Wednesday, I attended a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing where the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission reported on their findings. This Commission has spent the past two years examining the benefits and services available to veterans, service members and their families to compensate for the effects of disabilities and deaths from military service. The report recommends improvements in several areas, including enhancing treatment and compensation for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eliminating the ban on concurrent receipt of military retired pay and disability compensation and reducing the backlog in processing disabled veterans' claims for benefits.

In past months, Congress has heard from many experts on the steps our country should take to improve care and benefits for those who serve in the military. It is now Congress' turn to act and make the necessary changes. To speed these efforts along, I introduced legislation in September to implement the recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission to improve care for wounded warriors. [Click here for more information on this legislation.](#)

Discussing Opportunities and Challenges Facing Fort Riley and Surrounding Area

Soldiers and community members from the Fort Riley area were in Washington, D.C., this week to attend the annual convention of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA). I visited with leaders of the Junction City and Manhattan communities, as well as Fort Riley soldiers, about the opportunities and challenges of providing services to the growing population in the area resulting from an increasing number of missions at Fort Riley. I also visited with Maj. Gen. Robert Durbin, Commanding General of the 1st Infantry Division and Ft. Riley, as well as Ft. Riley's previous two commanding generals.

In with the group from Junction City were Connie Hall, Mike Rhodes, Susan Guinn, Ken Mortensen, Terry Heldstab, Rod Barnes, Jack Taylor, Ben Bennett, Ken Talley and Carol Gould. Representatives from Manhattan included Tom Phillips, Mark Hatesohl, Jim Sherow, Gary Fees, Lyle Butler, Bevin Landrum, Mike Shilling and Fred Welch.

Meeting with BMK Plumbing and Solar of the Midwest

On my return to Hays, I made a stop east of Salina to meet with Bob Dolan of BMK Plumbing & Solar of the Midwest. During the visit I toured two homes and learned how his business is utilizing both thermal (solar energy converted to heat) and photovoltaic solar (solar energy converted to electricity) systems to create energy efficient homes for his customers. I have sponsored legislation that would extend current tax incentives for this technology so that it can become a larger supplier of our energy needs. More information about my visit can be found by visiting the Salina Journal Web site or the KSAL Web site.

Mr. Dolan also recently provided assistance to a team of Kansas State University students participating in the 2007 Solar Decathlon, which is now being held in Washington, D.C. 20 teams from across the United States are participating in this event where student teams design, build and operate homes that are powered entirely by the sun. I plan on visiting K-State's solar home in our nation's capital upon returning to D.C. this week.

Celebrating Smoky Hills Public Television's 25th Anniversary

On Saturday evening, I joined Kansans to celebrate Smoky Hills Public Television's 25th Anniversary. I had the opportunity to introduce the featured guest for the evening - Jim Lehrer, executive editor and anchor of "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer." Mr. Lehrer was born in Wichita and is a distinguished journalist and broadcaster.

Smoky Hills Public Television is headquartered in Bunker Hill in Russell County and produces over 50 hours of Kansas-related programming each year. I have had a long relationship with this important contributor to the lives of people in western Kansas and I enjoyed spending the evening with the group. Congratulations to Smoky Hills Public Television for 25 years of service to the people of central and western Kansas.

Visiting with Kansas Students - In Kansas and from Washington, D.C.

I make an effort every year to interact with high school students to help them learn more about Congress and my role as a representative. While I make as many of these visits as I can in person, technology now allows me to speak with Kansas students while I am in Washington, D.C.

This week, I talked to Toby Countryman's students at Madison High School in Greenwood County from Washington, D.C., via video conference technology. The students and I visited about many issues including the war in Iraq and the importance of trade to Kansas. I appreciated the students' attention and thoughtful questions.

At the end of the week, I visited American government classes in person at Chapman High School, Hays High School and Lyons High School. I believe it is useful for students learning about how our government works to have an opportunity to visit with their elected officials. I always enjoy these discussions and thank the teachers at each school - Bob Almanza at Chapman High School, Casey Seyfert at Hays High School and Clancy Moses at Lyons High School.

Also on Friday, I visited Hutchinson High School to talk to students in Jay Sanderson's broadcast journalism class. Mr. Sanderson invited me to stop by the classroom and give the students the chance to learn how to interact and interview a public official. The class held a mock news conference with me. I was happy to answer their questions and enjoyed helping the students practice and learn the skills of reporting and journalism.

Visiting with Emporia State University Alumni and University Officials

After arriving in Washington, D.C., I stopped by a gathering of Emporia State University alumni hosted by the ESU Alumni Association. It was good to catch up with alumni who live in the capital area, as well as ESU officials who were in attendance, including President Michael Lane.

Honoring Lindsborg's Swedish Heritage during Svensk Hyllningsfest

I participated in Lindsborg's Svensk Hyllningsfest on Saturday, which is held every other year as a tribute to Swedish pioneers. The festival coincides with Bethany College homecoming and features art, special foods, folk dancing and entertainment. This event is well-attended and is an important part of our Kansas heritage. It is a neat time in the community. My thanks to Virgil "Bill" Burr of Salina for driving me in the parade.

Visiting Agriculture Businesses in Kansas City

Before traveling back to Washington, D.C., I visited the Kansas City Board of Trade on Tuesday. The Board of Trade is where hard red winter wheat futures contracts are traded. While there, I met with CEO Jeff Borchardt, Chairman of the Board Frank Stone and other board members and traders. I was honored to ring the bell that started the day's trading. [Click here to view a photo from my visit.](#)

Also while in Kansas City, I had the opportunity to visit Bartlett and Company. At Bartlett, I discussed the opportunities and challenges facing the agricultural industry with Jim Hebenstreit, John Gillcrist, Rod Geiger and Bill Webster.

Attending the Funeral Service for Benny Schulte

I joined family and friends of Benny Schulte in Victoria this week to honor a man whose passion for music touched many Kansans. Benny passed away Tuesday morning at the age of 77. He was known for his love of music and shared his talents with many as a music teacher at Victoria High School, music arranger, pianist and big-band leader. Also a U.S. Army veteran, Benny will be missed by all who knew him. My thoughts and prayers remain with his family.

In the Office

Jennifer Kim, Joseph McMahon, Lauren and Matthew Rowe, Shekhinah Jones, and Kylie Mauch of Salina were in our nation's capital participating in the People to People education program. The students came by my office to learn more about my role as their representative in Congress. Ed Harned, CEO of Affiliated Medical Services Laboratories of Wichita, was in to talk about accessibility to lab services.

Several Kansans stopped by my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol building, including Tim Allen of Clay Center, Leonard Wolfe of Marysville, Larry Kuckelman of Seneca, Elly Ritter of Salina and Trish Meetz of Lenexa with her friend, Donna Priddle of Missouri. Also in were James and Sharon Bowers of Great Bend and Jim, Diana and Ben Schmidt of Goessel.

Very truly yours,

Jerry