

## 12/03/2007 This Week in Congress

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December 3, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I am back in Washington, D.C., this week as Congress reconvenes after the Thanksgiving district work period. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Pushing Congress to Increase Resources for the Social Security Administration

Since 2001, the number of Americans waiting for a decision on their Social Security Disability claim has grown from 392,000 to about 785,000. This backlog is unacceptable and I am working with officials at the Social Security Administration (SSA) and my colleagues in Congress to address the issue.

I met with the head of the Social Security Administration last month to talk about the actions SSA is taking to reduce the backlog of citizens waiting to have their disability claim heard. While Commissioner Michael Astrue outlined several initiatives that will speed up the hearing process and reduce the backlog, the agency can only do as much as its funding allows. I urged the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee this week to give SSA a substantial funding increase. Should Congress approve this funding boost, I will watch carefully to make sure the money is spent wisely and

is used to provide Kansans with the level of timely service they deserve.

#### Emporia Site of Tenth Kansas Veterans' Forum

On Thursday, I hosted my tenth Kansas veterans' forum, this one in Emporia. Dan Umlauf, Director of the Robert J. Dole Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Regional Office in Wichita, and Marie Weldon, Director for the VA Hospital in Topeka, joined me to provide updates to veterans about benefits, health care and other veteran-related issues. Previous forums were held in Cimarron, Clay Center, Goodland, Hutchinson, Junction City, McPherson, Marion, Sabetha and Salina.

About 35 veterans from the area attended and asked questions ranging from the rating process to the current backlog of pending claims at the VA. Funding issues for the VA were also discussed. Thanks to all who attended, including Executive Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs George Webb and Representatives Peggy Mast and Don Hill of Emporia and Richard Carlson of St. Marys. I appreciate the hospitality of American Legion Post 5 in Emporia for hosting the forum and Post Commander John Sanderson for introducing me.

#### Learning about Flint Hills Technical College's Electric Industry Courses

After my Lyon County Tour Stop in Emporia, I visited Flint Hills Technical College to meet with Westar Energy representatives and educators and hear about the challenges facing the electric industry. Westar Energy, and the electric industry as a whole, is facing a shortage of skilled workers to replace retirement age workers. Flint Hills Technical College offers the electric industry and power plant technology courses needed to enter the field. Westar Energy and Wolf Creek Nuclear Operating Corporation have partnered with the college to increase awareness about electric industry careers among high school students. I was pleased to see that educational opportunities exist in our state to train people in a field which there is great demand for employees. Thanks to Steve Harmon with the college and Mark Schreiber with

Westar Energy for the invitation to learn more about the work they are doing.

### Visiting with Members of Leadership Emporia

Also while at the college, I visited with this year's Leadership Emporia class. Leadership Emporia is an educational program designed to nurture and enhance the leadership skills of individuals from all segments of the community. I spoke briefly to the group and commended them for their interest in shaping the future of Emporia and Lyon County. This leadership program and similar ones across the state play a significant role in the development of our communities. Congratulations to the members of this year's class: Tina Andrews, Keith Beatty, Bruce Boettcher, Shawn Braun, Becky Collins, Bryan Crouch, Laura Eddy, Richard Frevert, Sarah Harbaugh, De Henderson, David Milford, Nicole Mortensen, Corinne Patterson, Erin Reece, Lori Richard, Jamie Sauder, Sarah Shaw, Kelly Wade and Frannie Walburn. Thank you also to Jeanine McKenna, President and CEO of the Emporia Area Chamber of Commerce, for her work with this group and for giving me the opportunity to say hello.

### Spending Time in Hays

Hays Rotary Club: I attended my hometown Rotary Club meeting in Hays on Monday. The Hays High School Music Department presented the Christmas program during the meeting. It was a wonderful program. It was good to see many friends, including President Larry Dreiling.

Radiology Associates of Hays: Also this week, I had the opportunity to visit the Radiology Associates of Hays facility at the Hays Medical Center. Dr. Jules Whiteman provided me with a tour of rooms that showcased equipment used in radiology such as MRI and CT Scanning equipment. Radiologists provide an important service in the field of health care. Thank you to Dr. Whiteman for the visit. I also enjoyed seeing Dr. Michael Wright while there.

High School Music Performance: On Saturday, I attended the Northwest Kansas Music Educators Association (KMEA) District High School Honor Choir and Band Concert in Hays at the Beach-Schmidt Performing Arts Center located on the campus of Fort Hays State University. Approximately 180 students sang in the Honor Choir and more than 100 students played in the Honor Band. These outstanding students from 22 counties in northwest Kansas were selected from district auditions held in November. Congratulations to all the musicians on an outstanding performance and their music teachers, parents and communities for supporting them in the performing arts.

I also want to recognize Northwest KMEA District President Craig Manteuffel with Hays High School for organizing the event, Elise Peterson with Hays High for chairing the High School Honor Choir and Jeremey Wetter of Alma for chairing the High School Honor Band. My wife Robba accompanied the Honor Choir.

Hays High Shootout: Also on Saturday, I attended the 25th annual Hays High Shootout. The basketball tournament has been a Hays tradition for many years. The Hays High men's and women's teams both played well with the men finishing second and the women finishing fourth. I enjoyed watching the games and seeing many local friends. Good luck to the Hays High Indians as they continue their season. I wish them much success.

#### Visiting about the Cattle Industry with Kansas Livestock Association Members

I spent time Friday morning visiting with cattle producers from across the state at the Kansas Livestock Association's annual meeting in Wichita. It was good to see many familiar faces at the 95th annual convention and discuss current issues affecting the beef industry, including trade, disaster assistance and the farm bill. Thanks to Executive Vice President Dee Likes for the invitation to attend. Congratulations to outgoing President David Cross of Lewis for his efforts on behalf of Kansas producers this past year. I wish incoming President Tracy Brunner of Ramona all the best as he takes over the leadership of KLA.

## Listening Tour Continues

My Big First Listening Tour continued this week with stops in Leoti in Wichita County, Hugoton in Stevens County, Rolla in Morton County, Madison in Greenwood County and Emporia in Lyon County. Today I am in Dodge City in Ford County, and on Friday I will be in Waterville in Marshall County and Belleville in Republic County. [Click here to view times and locations and to stay up-to-date on other stops being scheduled.](#)

## In the Office

Dana Wethington of Topeka was in with the American Red Cross to provide an update on services available to military families and individuals affected by disasters.

In my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol were Jettie and Peg Condray of Minneapolis and Lori Obermueller of Lincoln. Also in were Gary, Beverly and Susan Hawk and Deb Smail of Iola. Gary Hawk and his family were in Washington, D.C., at the request of the President and First Lady to debut his and other artists' hand-decorated Christmas ornaments for display at the White House. Mr. Hawk painted a scene including the Fort Scott National Historic Site on a large ball ornament provided by the White House.

Very truly yours,

Jerry