

2/04/2008 This Week in Congress

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February 4, 2008

Dear Friend,

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

Veterans Now Receiving Increased Mileage Reimbursement Rate

Good news for veterans - on Friday, the veterans mileage reimbursement rate increase went into effect for veterans traveling to Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities. I successfully offered the amendment that led to the increased rate during House consideration of the 2008 VA funding bill last year, which was signed into law in December. Veterans will see an increase from 11 cents to 28.5 cents per mile for travel to routine medical visits. This is the first increase in the travel reimbursement rate for veterans since 1978 and will assist more than one million veterans as they travel to VA medical facilities.

Veterans have been waiting for 30 years for this rate increase and our nation has finally responded. I have worked on this issue since first coming to Congress. It is good to see Congress and the President come together to make improvements in how our nation cares for veterans, especially those living in rural areas. Many Kansas veterans must

travel several hours to access VA care. In a time of rising gas prices, more than doubling the rate of their reimbursement means the ability to better afford a trip to the doctor. I am glad the VA worked to implement the change right away this year. [Click here to listen to my audio on this topic.](#)

60 Kansas Counties Declared Federal Disaster Areas from December Storms

On Friday, the President approved a request from me and the Kansas delegation when he declared 60 Kansas counties federal disaster areas following extensive damage as a result of severe winter storms in mid-December. The President's declaration means Kansas communities will receive much needed help with clean-up efforts. Local governments will be able to use federal money to fund emergency work and repair of disaster-damaged facilities. This assistance is welcome news to many Kansans.

The declaration provides federal public assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for disaster relief. Counties included in the designation are: Atchison, Barber, Barton, Brown, Butler, Chase, Cherokee, Clark, Clay, Cloud, Comanche, Crawford, Dickinson, Doniphan, Edwards, Ellis, Ellsworth, Ford, Geary, Graham, Harvey, Hodgeman, Jackson, Jefferson, Jewell, Kingman, Kiowa, Labette, Leavenworth, Lincoln, Lyon, Marion, Marshall, McPherson, Miami, Mitchell, Morris, Nemaha, Osage, Osborne, Ottawa, Pawnee, Phillips, Pottawatomie, Pratt, Reno, Republic, Rice, Riley, Rooks, Rush, Russell, Saline, Sedgwick, Shawnee, Smith, Stafford, Wabaunsee, Washington and Woodson.

President Bush Delivers State of the Union

The President delivered his final State of the Union address on Monday night. Kansans were well represented with Senator Bob Dole and Greensburg City Administrator Steve Hewitt joining First Lady Laura Bush for the speech. Senator Dole was recognized for his work on the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors. Steve Hewitt was there representing Greensburg and Kiowa County citizens - a recognition of their tremendous work to overcome the damage sustained from a tornado last May. Kansas Wesleyan University President Dr. Philip Kerstetter was also in attendance as my guest at the speech.

The President covered a number of topics, including the budget, energy, health care, education, foreign policy and global hunger. I was disappointed that the President made no mention of agriculture or rural America. In a year when Congress is working to finish the farm bill, I expected the President to share his thoughts on working to better rural America. Here are some of my thoughts on the topics he did discuss.

Budget: I agree with the President that the amount of earmarks has grown out of control. While some earmarks can have a positive effect on local communities, I believe the process is broken. I support the President's decision to not sign any spending bill into law that does not include at least a 50 percent reduction in earmarks.

Education: While the concept of No Child Left Behind is a good one, I disagree with President Bush that this law has been a success. I did not vote in favor of this bill due to the burdensome regulations placed on teachers and schools. I am committed to working with Kansas teachers, parents, administrators and students to improve this law.

Energy: The price of energy remains one of my top concerns. Our nation is too reliant on foreign sources of energy to power our economy. I was pleased to hear the President call for greater use of clean coal, solar, wind and nuclear power. Kansas can play a leading role in helping America become more energy independent by growing crops for fuel and harnessing the winds of the Great Plains while maintaining a balanced approach to meeting our energy needs.

Global hunger: I agree with the President that the state of our union is strong, but as long as we have children going to bed hungry in our country I believe there is more to be done. As co-chair of the House Hunger Caucus, I look forward to working with the President to make sure that the hungry here and around the world are fed and given opportunities to provide for themselves.

Health care: The rising cost of health care is a concern for most Americans. The government must find ways to slow escalating prices while expanding accessibility for all Americans. Increasing our capacity to serve people at community health centers, investing in health information technology and allowing groups to band together to purchase health insurance at discounted rates are all steps that should be taken to help address this important issue.

Veterans: I am pleased President Bush recognizes the importance of caring for our veterans and continues to advocate for Congress to approve the recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission. I share Senator Dole's goal: to ensure our country is providing the best care and services to our military men and women and veterans, especially for those wounded in service to our country. Putting in place a strong support system for those who have served our country must be a priority.

War in Iraq: Reports seem to indicate increasing military success in Iraq under the leadership of General Petraeus. We must continue working with the Iraqi government toward political reconciliation so that Iraq can stand on its own and our troops can return home.

Kansans Want Congress to Make Stopping Illegal Immigration Top Priority

A recent poll on my Web site asked Kansans what issue should be Congress' top priority in 2008. Thirty percent of respondents answered that illegal immigration should receive the most attention this year, followed by the economy and jobs at 16 percent. These results are in line with what I am hearing on my annual listening tour from Kansans who continually express their desire for Congress to tackle the problem of illegal immigration.

I believe securing the border must be the first action we take when addressing illegal immigration. In addition to protecting the border, we also need to reform the bureaucracy to produce a fair and efficient immigration agency that encourages compliance with our laws so that those who wish to come to the United States legally are able to do so in a timely and appropriate manner.

I have sponsored the Secure America with Verification and Enforcement (SAVE) Act to strengthen border security and expand law enforcement efforts to make sure our immigration laws are followed. Specifically, the bill would hire 8,000 new Border Patrol agents and make use of technology to protect our border. The legislation also requires employers to verify the legal status of workers and expands detention facilities so that illegal immigrants are caught and not released back into society.

Watching the Wildcats Play the Jayhawks

I joined my daughter Kelsey, who is a student at Kansas State University, on Wednesday evening at Bramlage Coliseum in Manhattan to watch the Wildcats play the Jayhawks. K-State won and broke a record of 24 consecutive losses at home to KU. Fans from both schools can be proud that their teams are having good seasons. K-State and KU will meet again on March 1.

Recognizing Bob Schmidt and John Bird at Ellis County Democratic Reception

On Friday evening, I stopped by a reception held by the Ellis County Democratic Party. The event was held in honor of Bob Schmidt and John T. Bird for their years of dedication and service to the party. Both Bob and John received the Lifetime Achievement Award. These men have not only served their political party well, but have also been a model of

good citizenship in the Hays community. I was pleased to share my congratulations personally with Bob and John. I appreciate their involvement in Hays and am grateful for their friendship.

Big First Listening Tour Continues

I continued my listening tour with several stops this week. I visited Seneca, Washington, Junction City, Gaylord, Phillipsburg, Russell, Kinsley, Macksville and WaKeeney. After my stop in WaKeeney, I attended the Senior Citizen Benefit Pancake Feed at the local senior center. Today I am in Great Bend. [Click here](#) to stay up-to-date on additional stops being scheduled for this month.

In the Office

Speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives Melvin Neufeld of Ingalls was in to share his thoughts on the top priorities that the Kansas Legislature plans to address this year, including efforts to locate the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility in Manhattan. Brad and Danielle McCauley of White Cloud were in with the National Corn Growers Association to discuss farm bill policy. Tom Whitaker of Topeka, Mike Miller of La Crosse and Ken Leicht of Eskridge were in with the Kansas Motor Carriers Association to talk about Kansas Corporation Commission (KCC) regulations that propose expanded regulation of farm trucks.

Donna Wood, Thomas Page and Andrew Chapman of Wichita and Shelby Young of Liberal were in with the National Federation of the Blind to express the need for Braille textbooks in higher education and to update me on the status of the Talking Books project. Tanya Rempel and Rhonda Williams of Wichita were in with the American Burn Association to talk about funding for burn victims to receive treatment and burn research. Chris Tilden and Gloria Vermie of Topeka were in with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment to discuss rural health programs. Joining them was Jodi Schmidt of Hays with Hays Medical Center.

Steve Sloan, President of Midwest Minerals of Pittsburg, was in to underline the importance of highway funding and to emphasize mine safety. Derek Hess, Lyn Roberts and Doug Scott of Wichita were in with Hawker Beechcraft to explain the Air National Guard's development of the AT-6B aircraft and other military initiatives. Bruce Bertlesen, Bryan Neal, Alan McDonald and Howard Blankenship of Olathe and Connie Presley of Wichita were in with the National Air Traffic Controllers Association to talk about their current labor contract with the Federal Aviation Administration. Dr. Bob Honea from the University of Kansas stopped by to tell me about recent happenings at the Transportation Institute in Lawrence.

Representatives from the Salina Chamber of Commerce were in to discuss a handful of issues concerning their community, including cleanup at Schilling Air Force Base, the need for affordable housing, road improvements around the Smoky Hills Bombing Range and the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on USD 305. In with the group were Mayor Alan Jilka, City Manager Jason Gage, County Commission Chair Craig Stephenson, County Administrator Rita Deister, K-State Salina Dean Dennis Kuhlman, Kansas Wesleyan University President Dr. Philip Kerstetter, USD 305 Superintendent Dr. Robert Winter, Salina Airport Executive Director Tim Rogers, and Salina Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Dennis Lauver. Ed McKechnie of Pittsburg also stopped by this week to visit.

Steve and Kim Hewitt of Greensburg, Bill McKale of Wakefield and Brian Perkins of Wichita stopped by my Washington, D.C. office this week for a tour of the U.S. Capitol.

Very truly yours,

Jerry