

2/11/2008 This Week in Congress

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February 11, 2008

Dear Friend,

Welcome to this "This Week in Congress." This week is National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Week. On Friday on my way home from Washington, D.C., I was at the Colmery-O'Neil Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Topeka to visit with hospitalized Kansas veterans. I encourage you to take time out of your day to visit a hospitalized veteran this week and show your thanks for his or her service to our country.

Congress Approves Measure Aimed at Stimulating the Economy

On Thursday, the House and Senate approved a \$168 billion economic stimulus bill that is expected to be signed into law by the President. The measure includes rebate checks to individuals and business tax breaks.

The government should take action to address the challenges our economy is facing. However, I am concerned this package is not a good solution and that the money to pay for it is being borrowed from future generations and adding to our nation's debt. More debt creates pressure on raising interest rates, which then hurt homeowners, people who are trying to buy a home, people who want to buy a car and people who are trying to pay off credit card debt. I believe Congress and the President should aggressively pursue policies that reduce the price of fuel and costs of health care. These two things are what are so damaging to the family budget in Kansas. I believe we should not sacrifice our long-term economy for a short-term, ineffective fix.

Continuing Work to Ensure Mental Health Services Available to Veterans

This week, I continued my efforts to ensure veterans have access to mental health care services in a visit to the Dwight D. Eisenhower Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center in Leavenworth. Multiple deployments have taken a toll on our service members and their families. With a number of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, I have focused on the need for mental health programs and counseling services to treat illnesses like post traumatic stress disorder.

I have learned the VA, like many communities across Kansas, is challenged by a shortage of mental health professionals. Now that Congress and the President have come together and provided additional resources, the VA is in a better position to care for the mental health needs of our service members returning from war and for our veterans. I want to make sure the funds are used accordingly and that the VA is doing what it is supposed to in regard to mental health programs. I appreciated Public Affairs Director Jim Gleisberg and Assistant Director Judith Johnson-Mekota taking me through the facility. [Click here to read more about this topic.](#)

Agriculture Subcommittee Reviews Law to Attract Veterinarians to Rural Areas

On Thursday, the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy and Poultry held a hearing to review implementation of the National Veterinary Medical Service Act. The bill was passed by Congress as a means to attract graduating veterinarians to underserved areas, such as large animal practices in rural America. The program does this by providing student loan reimbursement payments in return for the veterinarian's agreement to practice in an underserved area. Although Congress passed the law in 2003 and provided funding to implement the program, USDA has failed to begin administering the program. I expressed my dissatisfaction with USDA's implementation progress. It is important to have veterinarians in our rural communities, not only to serve ranchers, but to provide the first line of defense against potential bioterrorism attacks on our food supply. I will continue to insist USDA begins administration of this program.

National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility Moves Forward

Kansans working to bring the proposed National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) to the campus of Kansas State University took notice on Monday when President Bush submitted to Congress his 2009 budget request. Included in the budget was \$35.6 million for NBAF development. I serve on the NBAF Task Force, formed to bring the federal research facility to Kansas, and was pleased to see that the Administration considers this project a priority. I will work to ensure these resources for NBAF are supported by Congress as it puts together this coming year's budget.

Kansans at the local, state and federal levels are working to bring NBAF to Manhattan, which is one of the finalists for the site location. The federal facility will be our nation's premier biosecurity research laboratory to keep our country's people and animals safe against biological and agricultural threats. It would provide substantial economic benefits to Kansas. Each site finalist is now undergoing an environmental impact study and a decision is expected this fall.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Peake Presents Budget Proposal to Committee

On Thursday, I participated in a hearing of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs featuring newly-confirmed Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary James B. Peake. Secretary Peake discussed the Administration's budget submission to fund veterans' programs next year, which is about a 3.6 percent increase in funding over 2008 levels and more than double the funding level from 2001.

I am pleased President Bush continues to advocate for implementing the recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission. Despite these efforts, I expressed to the Secretary a number of concerns I have with the proposed VA budget. I am opposed to the Administration's plan to charge some veterans more for their health care costs. I have opposed this every year and will work to see Congress continues to reject enrollment fees and higher prescription drug co-payments for veterans in the VA's Priority Groups 7 and 8. I also expressed my opposition to the Administration's continued ban on allowing Priority 8 veterans from enrolling in VA health care. Greater attention must also be given to reducing the unacceptably large backlog of pending disability claims that has caused undue hardships for veterans who must now wait an average of 183 days for claims decisions. Congress should also act to better enable the VA to hire medical professionals in rural areas and to ensure veterans living in these areas can access care.

Recognizing Young Kansas Artists in the Congressional Art Competition

On Saturday, I presented awards to young Kansas artists for the Congressional Arts Competition in a ceremony at the Visual Arts Alliance of McPherson. Each year, I host the Congressional Arts Competition for Kansas high school students. This year more than 100 entries were received from 14 schools throughout the congressional district.

This year's competition was divided into six categories: painting, drawing, collage, mixed media, printmaking and photography. Ciera Nelson of Little River received best of show for her acrylic painting entitled Sunset. Ciera's artwork will be on display this year in the U.S. Capitol.

The winners of each category are as follows:

Painting:

First Place: Christen Markovich, Great Bend High School

Second Place: Kali Roberts, Hill City High School

Third Place: Pam Watson, St. John High School

Drawing:

First Place: Andrea Ferretti, Deerfield High School

Second Place: Lane Porter, McPherson High School

Third Place: Kwan Watson, St. John High School

Collage:

First Place: Emily Bucl, Hill City High School

Second Place: Lane Porter, McPherson High School

Third Place: Molly Rondeau, Great Bend High School

Mixed Media:

First Place: Jessica Miller, Little River High School

Second Place: Kelsie Nickelson, Hill City High School

Third Place: Emily Bucl, Hill City High School

Printmaking:

First Place: Adrienne Wolters, Osborne High School

Second Place: Apryl Schmucker, Little River High School

Third Place: Jacy Porter, Little River High School

Photography:

First Place: Danielle Dougherty, Little River High School

Second Place: Megan Stagner, Little River High School

Third Place: Elizabeth Stephens, Wheatland High School

Congratulations to all of the winners and participants in this year's competition. I would like to thank the Visual Arts Alliance of McPherson and President Michaela Groeblicher for hosting the event this year. Also, thanks to Wayne Conyers, chair of the Art Department at McPherson College, for judging the entries and to the Home State Bank and People's Bank and Trust of McPherson for providing the prizes. Finally, special thanks to former Congressman Dick Nichols and his wife, Linda, for providing the refreshments.

Participating in the Kansas Caucus

Kansans across the state participated in the Kansas Republican Caucus on Saturday. Before the Congressional Arts Reception, I attended the McPherson Caucus to place my vote. Later that day, I was also a guest on the Fox News Weekend Live program to discuss the Kansas Caucus.

Visiting with Kansas Students, Rotarians and Businesses this Week

University of Kansas basketball game: On Monday evening, I had the opportunity to visit with Chancellor Robert Hemenway during the University of Kansas versus University of Missouri basketball game. Chancellor Hemenway and I discussed the Higher Education Act that was being considered in the House this week. I also shared my continued interest in expanding the KU Pharmacy School and support for a program KU is developing at Fort Leavenworth for educating injured soldiers.

During half time, Chancellor Hemenway and Athletic Director Lew Perkins presented Head Football Coach Mark Mangino and Kansas Jayhawk football players with the FedEx Orange Bowl trophy. I joined the rest of the Kansas congressional delegation in sponsoring a resolution in the House of Representatives recognizing KU for its football accomplishments and winning the Orange Bowl. Thanks to Chancellor Hemenway, KU Dean of Law Gail Agrawal, Lew Perkins, Head Basketball Coach Bill Self and Keith Yehle for their hospitality.

Baker University Political Science class: I visited Baker University to participate in Professor Ryan Beasley's political science class. This class is required for all seniors majoring in political science. I appreciated the opportunity to visit with the students and learn about their thesis projects.

Ransom Memorial Hospital: I stopped by Ransom Memorial Hospital in Ottawa to meet with CEO Larry Felix, CFO Dean Ohmart and Fred Lucky with the Kansas Hospital Association for a discussion about how the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) impacts hospitals in Kansas like Ransom Memorial. We discussed the tedious CMS regulations placed on hospitals across the country and the negative impact they have on Ransom Memorial. We also discussed the need to adequately fund hospitals for the costs they have in providing care for Medicare patients.

Ottawa Rotary Club: I joined fellow Rotarians in Ottawa on Tuesday at Ottawa University. I enjoyed giving a synopsis of the current happenings in Washington, D.C., and answering questions from the members. Thanks to Tom Weigand, Rotary Club President and President of the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce, for hosting me.

Roundtable with Olathe Transportation and City Officials: I was at Olathe City Hall to meet with Mayor Michael Copeland and a group of business leaders from Olathe for a discussion focusing on transportation and highway needs. I am gathering input from Kansans as we prepare for next year's transportation bill in Congress. We discussed how the high cost of gasoline seriously impacts the cost of doing business. We also discussed the new biotechnology park being built in Olathe in conjunction with the Kansas Bioscience Authority and the K-State at Olathe Innovation Campus. Thanks to Frank Taylor, Dr. Dan Richardson, Dr. Bill Duncan, Dave Harrison, Rob Boyer, Ron Ryckman and Rob Heise for participating.

Kansas City Regional Association of Realtors: Later that day, I attended a meeting of the Kansas City Regional Association of Realtors in Leawood. While there I gave a short talk on the issues that are being considered in Congress and discussed with the group issues affecting realtors in Kansas. I also answered questions on topics ranging from the farm bill to the global war on terrorism. Thanks to Fran Cashion, Elaine Cavener, Kathy Copeland, Robert Curtis, Nancy

Davis, Kirby Deeter, Susan Ewert Younger, Kirk Blinzler, Lisa Ebbitts, Janet Galvin, Cindy Green, Patricia Koch, Steve Kornspan, Brad Himi, Mike Faulconer, Tracey Mann, Jennifer Martin, Marsha Monica, Daniel O'Neill, Marge Pfaff, Diane Ruggiero, David Salem, Darrel Stiles, Dorothy Taylor, Pat Tholen, Brant Tidwell, Kathy Woodward, Jack Ronen, Bill Robbins and Randy Cobb for attending.

Thanking Lenexa Leaders for Supporting Greensburg: While in Johnson County on Tuesday, I took advantage of an opportunity to visit my friend Lenexa Mayor Michael Boehm and thank the City of Lenexa for the support it has lent to Greensburg. In my many visits to Greensburg since the tornado, I have seen Lenexa trucks and workers helping out the residents of Kiowa County. I appreciated the opportunity to visit with Mayor Boehm, City Council members and other leaders, including Cindy Green, Andy Huckaba, Jane Klein, Diane Linver, Thomas Nolte, John Ramsey, Amy Slater, Dan Sullivan, Anna Ancil, Molly Deckert, Cindy Harmison, Roger Kroh, Matt Shatto and Eric Wade.

Celebrating Longtime Hays Resident Celly Schumacher's 75th Birthday

On Sunday, I attended Celly Schumacher's 75th birthday party at the American Legion in Hays. Celly is a family friend and the longtime manager of the Dillon's in Hays. It was a nice celebration and I wish Celly many more happy and healthy years.

Big First Listening Tour Continues

I continued my listening tour with a stop in Great Bend this week. This evening I will be in Council Grove to attend the Kiwanis Club meeting. The meeting takes place at 6:00 p.m. at Pizza Hut, 15 N. Union St. I will continue my listening tour next week with several stops:

Monday, February 18

Rawlins County Tour Stop, Atwood

Time: 8:30-9:30 a.m.

Location: Farmers Bank & Trust, 101 S. 4th St.

Decatur County Tour Stop, Oberlin

Time: 10:00-11:00 a.m.

Location: Oberlin Chamber of Commerce, hospitality room, 104 S. Penn Ave.

Norton County Tour Stop, Norton

Time: 12:00-1:00 p.m.

Location: Rotary Club, Town and Country Kitchen, E Highway 36

Tuesday, February 19

Finney County Tour Stop, Holcomb

Time: 9:45-10:45 a.m.

Location: Holcomb High School Auditorium, 600 N. Jones St.

Gray County Tour Stop, Cimarron

Time: 12:00-1:00 p.m.

Location: Rotary Club, Richie's Café, 408 W. Avenue A

Thursday, February 21

Cheyenne County Tour Stop, St. Francis

Time: 10:30-11:30 a.m.

Location: Main Street Coffee, 216 W. Washington

Wallace County Tour Stop, Sharon Springs

Time: 12:00-1:00 p.m. MST

Location: Rotary Club, Stephen's Restaurant, Junction 27 & 40

Saturday, February 23

Ness County Tour Stop, Ransom

Time: 8:30-9:30 a.m.

Location: VFW Post #7972, 398 S. Vermont Ave.

[Click here to stay up-to-date on additional stops being scheduled.](#)

In the Office

Mid America Nazarene University President Dr. Ed Robinson and Vice President of Institutional Advancement Dwight Douglas of Olathe were in to discuss education issues. Mike McCrew and Luke Bell of Lawrence, Brian Jones of Pittsburg, Sue Wenger of Mulvane, and Cherise Sedlock of Kansas City were in with the Kansas Association of Realtors to advocate for Federal Housing Administration reform and to talk about the housing market in Kansas, as well as other legislation before Congress. Bob Timmons of Fredonia was in with the National Corn Growers Association to discuss the status of the farm bill.

Jean Anna Sellers of Fort Hays State University (FHSU) visited my office with two educators from Egypt, Dr. Khaled Gad and Yasser Hussein Gomaa. They were accompanied by Patricia Elder from the Cooperative Education Exchange Program. The group was in to talk about the success of cooperative education at FHSU and the benefits of economic education here at home and overseas in countries like Egypt. Diane Greenleaf and Grace Wong of Wichita, Karla Huser of Fredonia, and Velentina Remia of Manhattan were in with the American Dietetic Association to promote nutrition education and to advocate for adequate funding for food assistance programs.

David McKee and Scott Day of Topeka, Michael Moulin of Overland Park, and Trent Nichols of Mulvane were in with the Kansas Chapter of the National Association of Health Underwriters to discuss the State Children's Health Insurance Program and the importance of long term care insurance. Hamilton Bock of Dodge City was in with Sunflower Bank to talk about the farm bill and matters related to banking in Kansas. Phil Black and Mary Anne Trickle of Salina, Rodney Roush of Stafford, Keith Becker of Galva, John Scheopner of Garden City, Kent Swartz of South Barber, and Cindy Kelly of Topeka were in with the National School Board Association to explain their priorities for No Child Left Behind reauthorization.

Jim Edwards of Salina was in with Mid-continent Research Education and Learning to discuss the group's role in supporting education in Kansas. Dr. Fred Burry, Dallas Polen, and Genny Nicholas of Kansas City were in with Children's Mercy Hospital to explain the services the hospital offers and to talk about the need to fund graduate medical education programs. Blake West of Topeka, Mark Farr of Nickerson, Verlean Brown of Wichita, and Todd Roberts of Emporia were in with the Kansas National Education Association to discuss reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act and the President's budget.

Representatives from Kansas State University were in to talk about their 2008 legislative priorities. In with the university were John English, Jim Gukeme, Joan Blair, Bancroft McKitterim, Marty Vanier, Steve White, Virginia Moxley, Fred Cholick, Ralph Richardson, Dennis Kuhlman, and Sue Peterson. Members of the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers were also in to discuss the farm bill. In with the group were John Thaemert of Sylan Grove, Joe Kejr of Brookeville, Jerry McReynolds of Woodston, Paul Penner of Hillsboro, and David Schemm of Sharon Springs.

Donna Huffman of Ozawkie, Craig Yaryan of El Dorado, Shana Sowels of Olathe, Connie Swafford of Bonner Springs, and A.W. Pickel of Overland Park were in with the Kansas Association of Mortgage Brokers to discuss provisions in legislation reforming the Federal Housing Administration that affect the mortgage industry. Ken Canfield of Overland Park and Brad Mayhew of Lawrence also were in to visit.

Very truly yours,

Jerry