

2/25/2008 This Week in Congress

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February 25, 2008

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I am returning to our nation's capital today after spending the week in Kansas during the President's Day District Work Period. Congress did not consider any legislation this week as representatives were given time to meet with folks at home. I spent the week visiting with Kansans at eight town hall meetings in Rawlins, Decatur, Norton, Finney, Gray, Cheyenne, Wallace and Ness Counties as part of my Big First Listening Tour. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Cuban President Fidel Castro Steps Down

It was good news to many to hear Cuban President Fidel Castro will be departing from office. This is an opportunity for the U.S. government to encourage economic changes that will give the Cuban people a long-sought improvement in their living standards and a market for farmers and ranchers in Kansas.

In 2001, an amendment I offered helped resume agricultural exports to Cuba for the first time in 38 years. American trade with Cuba grew until 2005 when the Department of Treasury changed its interpretation of the cash payment in advance

rule as it relates to agriculture exports to Cuba. The change caused Cuban payments to be made for U.S. agricultural commodities before ships leave U.S. ports rather than making payment upon delivery. The change made it more difficult for American farmers to sell their products to Cuba. I successfully offered amendments to spending bills in 2005, 2006 and 2007 to prohibit the Department of Treasury from carrying out its rule. I plan to pursue similar legislation this year.

Five decades of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation has not forced change in Cuba's government. We should not let this new opportunity pass. The United States should be a part of writing this new chapter in the lives of the Cuban people.

Kansas Corporation Commission Releases New Interstate Commerce Policy

The Kansas Corporation Commission (KCC) this week released a new policy regarding its interpretation of interstate commerce. KCC was proposing to consider the transportation of grain from a Kansas farm to a local elevator as interstate commerce since the grain may ultimately be sold to an out-of-state buyer. KCC altered its interpretation that commodity shipments within the borders of Kansas will not be considered interstate commerce unless there is clear evidence the shipper intends for the commodity to leave the state. This change should mean that many farmers and ranchers who deliver agricultural commodities to local grain elevators and sale barns will not be subject to Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration regulations.

I met with officials last week to discuss these regulations and am pleased KCC acted quickly to change its interpretation. Had KCC not made this change, it would have placed burdensome regulations on most of our Kansas farmers and ranchers. KCC informed me that putting forth the rule was for compliance with federal rules, rather than safety concerns. [Click here to read the language of the new KCC policy.](#)

At a time when our nation is asking so much from our men and women in uniform, it is important we provide our service members and their families with the high quality of life they deserve. This week, I wrote the United Service Organization (USO) to encourage the establishment of USO programs at Fort Riley. The USO's mission is to support the troops by providing morale, welfare and recreation-type services to our men and women in uniform. As more and more soldiers and their families come to the area, there is a growing need for recreation and leisure activities like those provided by the USO. I am pleased to join the leadership of Fort Riley and surrounding communities in requesting the USO at Fort Riley as we work to make the installation the best home for our nation's soldiers.

Congress Must Get Priorities Straight

Many Kansans have expressed their frustration that Congress is spending time and taxpayer dollars to investigate steroid use in Major League Baseball. While steroid use is a serious matter, I share the belief of Kansans that this should be an issue for the Commissioner of Baseball. Congress needs to devote its attention to issues like reducing health care costs, promoting energy independence and completing the farm bill.

Visiting with Agricultural Producers at the Annual High Plains Ag Expo

Before my county tour stops on Thursday, I attended the Annual High Plains Agriculture Expo in Goodland. There was a good turnout at the Max Jones Fieldhouse where producers heard from program speakers about a variety of current ag issues and viewed exhibits from several area businesses. Thanks to Marty Melia with KKCI/KLOE Radio in Goodland for the invitation to attend.

Honoring the Life of Dr. Mace Braxton of Salina

This weekend, I joined hundreds of Kansans at funeral services for Dr. Mace Braxton of Salina. I am blessed to have known and to have had the opportunity to work with Dr. Braxton. He founded the heart surgery program at Salina Regional Health Center and saved many lives through his surgical work. Service was not a burden or obligation for Mace; it was his calling and way of life. I value the time and care he put into being a member of my Service Academy Selection Board for the past five years. Mace was many things to many people - a doctor, a veteran, a community leader and most importantly, a loving family man. He leaves behind a legacy of compassion, honor and service and his life serves as an example to us all.

Attending Events in Hays

United Way of Ellis County Annual Meeting and Campaign Celebration: On Tuesday, I attended the annual meeting and campaign celebration for the United Way of Ellis County. United Way provides assistance for its 15 member agencies within Ellis County and is an invaluable asset to our community. Again this year, I served as Heritage Society Chair for this year's campaign. The campaign raised \$442,900. My thanks to Executive Director Sue Rouse and the 2007 campaign leadership team of Chair Travis Kohlrus and Board of Directors President Lonny Claycamp for all of their hard work and dedication.

Birthday Luncheon for Ross Beach: Ross Beach has been a leader in Kansas for many years and has contributed a great deal to Hays and other communities across the state. On Friday, I attended a lunch in Hays honoring my longtime friend's 90th birthday. Ross is an incredible individual and I am deeply grateful for the friendship of him and his wife, Marianna.

P.E.O.-B.I.L. Valentine's Dinner: On Tuesday evening, Robba and I attended the annual P.E.O.-B.I.L. Valentine's Dinner in Hays. PEO is a philanthropic and educational organization interested in providing increased opportunities for women in higher education. Robba has been a member of PEO since 1986.

Hays Medical Center Foundation Fundraiser: On Saturday, the Hays Medical Center Foundation held a dinner and fundraiser at the Smoky Hill Country Club. I was thankful for the opportunity to talk to health care professionals and community members about developments at Hays Medical Center. The First District is home to 75 health care facilities, including Hays Medical Center. Robba just completed her tenure as a trustee of the Hays Medical Center.

Big First Listening Tour Continues

From Capitol Hill to Bunker Hill, I will continue my Listening Tour next week with stops in the following communities:

Monday, March 3

Marion County Tour Stop, Peabody

Time: 1:45-2:45 p.m.

Location: Senior Center, 106 N. Walnut

Chase County Tour Stop, Elmdale

Time: 3:15-4:15 p.m.

Location: United Methodist Church, basement meeting room, 301 Spruce

Friday, March 7

Wabaunsee County Tour Stop, Wabaunsee

Time: 9:30-10:30 a.m.

Location: Cottonwood School House, 39966 Hwy 99

Dickinson County Tour Stop, Abilene

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

Location: Rotary Club, Abilene Country Club, 1705 Country Club Lane

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

Very truly yours,

Jerry