

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington - June 27, 2003

PRESCRIPTION DRUG BILL PASSES SENATE

Early this morning, the Senate passed a prescription drug benefit for America's seniors. This plan is not perfect, but I believe that after so many failed attempts it is an important step towards providing the medicines that seniors need.

I am proud that the bill begins to address the inequity in Medicare reimbursement rates, to bring rural areas in line with urban areas. This will help Washington state and is a meaningful step towards equity for Washington seniors.

This is certainly not the drug plan I would have written – there are still too many gaps in coverage, too many unfair regional discrepancies, and the bill begins to privatize drug benefits despite the limited success of private insurance in Medicare. But, this plan is a step forward and I am hopeful that we can still make improvements before it takes effect in 2006.

FERRY TRANSPORTATION ENHANCEMENT ACT

Yesterday I introduced the Ferry Transportation Enhancement Act to help boost the federal investment in ferry transportation across the country. My bill will authorize a four-fold increase in resources to state governments, public ferry systems, and public entities responsible for the development and construction of ferry facilities.

Ferries transporting people and vehicles across the state is as much a symbol of our state's identity as Boeing Aircraft and Washington Apples. Ferry travel is an important and growing mode of transportation in Washington State and across the country. But despite the fact that it is a preferred and sometimes the sole mode of transportation, there is virtually no coordination at the federal level to encourage and promote ferry transportation.

Washington State is home to the largest ferry operation in the country, transporting 26 million passengers and 11 million vehicles each year. And those numbers are growing. Despite increased use, the federal investment in ferries pales in comparison to funding granted for other transportation projects and methods of mass transit. In fact, the federal investment in ferries is currently only one-tenth of one percent of the total Surface Transportation Program.

If passed, my bill will provide four times the amount currently appropriated for ferry systems. The bill will provide some of the resources and support necessary to allow ferries to remain safe and efficient. My bill will also help the environment. It adds ferries to the Clean Fuels Program which helps boat makers design cleaner and more efficient vessels.

By passing this very important legislation, not only will Congress help the millions of people each year who ride ferries, but we will be preserving the earth and respecting an important Washington symbol.

HELP ON THE WAY FOR SEATAC

Anyone who has flown in or out of Sea-Tac in recent weeks has noticed lengthy waits to go through security. Over the past two weeks, security checkpoint delays of two hours or more have caused hundreds of passengers to miss their flights. Many flights have been required to delay their departures as they wait for passengers to clear security. These waits are unacceptable and the situation demands immediate attention.

Airport terminals that are overcrowded with passengers are themselves a security risk. Airport traffic is starting to picking up for the summer, but excessive lines and delayed departures will discourage people from flying. This is a hassle for passengers and could hurt our airlines and their suppliers at a time when they can least afford it.

That is why this week I asked that Transportation Security Administrator James Loy personally look into the current conditions at Sea-Tac and ensure that every conceivable measure is taken to clear passengers and end the current delays. I am proud to announce that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has agreed to provide \$159 million over the next four years to improve passenger and baggage screening at Sea-Tac airport. During the last year, I wrote legislation to direct the TSA to provide this funding to Sea-Tac, and I am proud to say that help is on the way.

The federal funding will enable Sea-Tac to move the baggage screening equipment out of the overcrowded main terminal, and allow passengers to leave their checked bags with airline personnel when they check in.

TIME TO KEEP OUR PROMISES ON HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION

This week I made the decision to vote against the Labor, Health, Human Services and Education Committee's spending bill. As a member of the Committee and long time advocate for education and health care issues, I could not support a bill that made so many drastic cuts to so many important priorities – for children and families.

The bill cuts funding for education in the No Child Left Behind Act. In fact, it underfunds the needs of our schools and children by \$8 billion, leaving millions of children behind. The budget also cuts support for important programs like Safe and Drug Free Schools, teacher quality and class size reduction, and teacher training in the area of technology. We cannot expect to maintain our schools and educate our children without the resources and support for these important projects.

Among the many unacceptable cuts to health care funding is the elimination of the Community Access Program (CAP). CAP is a community-based initiative that helps provide healthcare for the uninsured. And with cuts to Medicaid, and more people losing jobs and healthcare, CAP is more important than ever. Currently, four Washington state communities receive CAP funding help to provide healthcare for the uninsured. Today, CAP efforts are making a difference in Spokane, Wenatchee, Olympia, and Seattle. At a time when more people are out of work, we should be investing more in CAP, not eliminating it.

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