

Rep. Petri's E-Newsletter September 16, 2009

- * Town Meetings**
- * Merc Stays!**
- * Focus On the Deficit**
- * Student Loan Reform Moves Forward**
- * Also Coming Up In Congress**
- * What I've Been Up To**
- * Academy Information Day**

Town Meetings

I recently concluded my latest round of 12 town meetings throughout Wisconsin's 6th Congressional District. I found these meetings very helpful in understanding what people at home are thinking about the important topics being debated in Washington. In this case, obviously, health care was the dominant subject discussed.

On balance, the majority of attendees were opposed to the major health care bills currently being considered in Congress, but those proposals also had numerous defenders. I greatly appreciate the time and effort everyone took to come and share their thoughts on this complex, yet important, issue.

These are challenging times and all of the meetings I held were very well attended. As a matter of fact, we set attendance records in each location. In some places, we actually had capacity problems, and I would like to apologize to anyone who wasn't able to get into any of my meetings.

Merc Stays!

Probably most residents of the 6th District, and particularly those from Fond du Lac, are relieved that Mercury Marine will be staying and growing in our community. I realize that the workers at the company had a hard choice to make and that county residents will be chipping in as a result of the final agreement. But it should be clear to everybody that if Mercury Marine had decided to leave Fond du Lac, the consequences would have been devastating to our local economy, our employment prospects and our tax base.

Focus On the Deficit

The late Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen is said to have joked, "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money!" Unfortunately, these days in Washington you have to say "trillion" to make the Senator's point.

Just a year ago, who would have thought that this year's annual federal deficit would be about \$1.6 trillion? That's 11 percent of the Gross Domestic Product - the highest level since World War II.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office recently estimated that under current law we will add \$9 trillion to the federal debt over the next 10 years. Using CBO analyses, if the President's proposed tax and spending policies are enacted, that figure grows to \$10 trillion.

The total federal debt, which was 58 percent of the G.D.P. in 2000, would reach 101 percent by 2011. Simply paying the interest on this debt would crowd numerous priorities out of the budget, even with considerably higher taxes.

I am reminded of Argentina, which was one of the world's 10 most prosperous economies from 1910 until 1930 due to its abundant natural resources and agricultural exports. Then, with the Great Depression, poor populist economic policies caused that country to fall behind, and it has been plagued by economic problems ever since. We must not let that happen here.

Student Loan Reform Moves Forward

The Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act is expected on the floor of the House today and tomorrow. While I do not like everything in the bill, I am very pleased about some key student loan provisions.

Currently, there are two major federal student loan programs: the Direct Loan program, through which loans are made directly to students by the government; and the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) Program, which uses private lenders to fund student loans but the government provides those lenders with federal subsidies to ensure a guaranteed rate of return. The federal government also provides a guarantee on these loans, meaning that if a student defaults, taxpayers are on the hook rather than the private lender.

I started working on the Direct Loan program some 20 years ago at the suggestion of financial aid experts in the state of Wisconsin, got it adopted as an experimental program at Marquette and a number of other colleges around the country, and worked with President Clinton to expand it nationwide.

Direct Loans have proven to be a far better deal than the FFEL program for both taxpayers and students. And now, finally, we are about to shut FFEL down while expanding Direct Loans.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has determined that doing away with the FFEL program and replacing it with Direct Loans could save taxpayers \$87 billion over 10 years while still providing better loan terms and the same availability for students. That \$87 billion indicates the huge subsidies the FFEL program has been doling out to unnecessary middlemen in private financial institutions. Those institutions have fought tooth and claw to hold onto their taxpayer-financed gravy train, and playing a central role in defeating those special interests gives me great satisfaction.

Also Coming Up In Congress

Health Care: A top priority for the congressional leadership is health care, and we can be sure that bills will be brought to the full House and Senate as soon as they are ready and the Democrats believe they have the votes they need for passage. When or if that will happen is anybody's guess.

Most assume that something which the President will be able to call "health care reform" will reach the President's desk this year, but the contents and extent of the legislation are very much in question. While I think we need health care reform, the major proposals under discussion are seriously flawed.

Appropriations Bills: The House has already approved all 12 of the big annual spending bills. The Senate has passed four and is expected to move quickly on the remaining eight this month. However, negotiations to iron out differences between the House and Senate versions of the bills will likely not be completed before the start of the new fiscal year on Oct. 1, so a continuing resolution probably will be needed to keep some departments funded until all disagreements have been reconciled.

Climate Change: The House approved H.R. 2454 in June. This is legislation to establish a cap and trade system designed to limit CO2 greenhouse gas emissions. I voted against the bill because it would likely cause utility bills to skyrocket, and would be especially bad for our part of the country since our homes and industries are highly dependent on coal-generated power. There is considerable doubt that this bill will get through the Senate, but it may be considered before the end of the year.

Climate change is a serious concern, but it doesn't make sense to go to great expense for results which would be marginal and largely symbolic.

FAA: With Congress having failed to approve legislation to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration, the FAA is operating under a temporary extension, and another extension will be necessary as the current one expires Sept. 30.

This past May the House approved H.R. 915 to provide a multi-year reauthorization, and the Senate may get to its version, S. 1451, before the end of the year. Negotiating the differences between the two bills will not be easy.

Surface Transportation: House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman James Oberstar very much wants to move a six-year reauthorization bill for the nation's highways and rails, and a draft proposal has been released. However, the Senate and the President seem to prefer an 18-month extension of the existing bill.

It is most likely that we will take up an extension since authority for the program would otherwise end on Sept. 30.

Financial Regulation: An overhaul of the financial regulatory system may reach the House floor in a series of bills in October. The Senate is aiming for the end of the year.

What I've Been Up To

The House was out of session during August, so I spent the month in east-central Wisconsin, meeting with people and listening to their concerns.

As mentioned above, I held 12 town meetings throughout the 6th District. Also, I hosted a small business conference at Lakeshore Technical College in Cleveland on August 12. Over 120 business people participated in the various forums on how to do business with the state and federal governments and on government loans available to small businesses.

I was honored to participate in an event commemorating the 15th anniversary of the Sheboygan County Veterans Memorial in Sheboygan.

At Silver Lake College I attended the dedication ceremony for a new residence hall.

I was a guest at the Lao-Hmong National Summer Festival luncheon in Oshkosh.

Focusing on the needs of our local economy and issues of importance to area manufacturers, I visited the Gulfstream Aerospace Corp. in Appleton, and Great Northern Corp. in the Town of Menasha, Wis-Pak in Watertown, and Orion Energy Systems in Manitowoc.

I toured the Baker Cheese Company of rural St. Cloud and visited Majestic Meadows Dairy near Sheboygan Falls as part of a showcase of the Central Wisconsin Dairy Industry sponsored by the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and the Wisconsin Dairy Business Association.

Health care-related meetings included visits to the Watertown Regional Medical Center, Agnesian Health Care in Fond du Lac, and the Fox Cities Community Health Center in Menasha. I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr. John Toussaint, CEO of the ThedaCare Center for Healthcare Value in Appleton.

In Wautoma I met with Waushara County's "Vision 2020" poverty task force and made a presentation on the disincentives which make it hard for people to get off public assistance and what we in Congress can do about it to help recipients toward self-sufficiency.

I met with personnel and board members to discuss legislation at the Domestic Violence Center of Manitowoc, and visited the Migrant Seasonal Head Start facility in Beaver Dam.

And I spoke at a meeting sponsored by the Winnebago Home Builders Association in Oshkosh, met with Chamber of Commerce groups in Manitowoc, Fond du Lac, Sheboygan and Oshkosh, and joined Howards Grove seniors for lunch at their senior meal site, where I also spoke to the group.

Also, I spent part of a day in Chicago participating in a forum on railroad infrastructure.

And I wrote two columns expressing my concerns about the health care proposals currently in Congress. One was published in daily and weekly newspapers in the 6th District; the other was in the Sept. 5 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. They can both be found on my Web site at: <http://petri.house.gov/column.shtml>

Academy Information Day

Later this month I will join with Senator Kohl, Senator Feingold and Rep. Kagen in hosting an Academy Information Day. This is an opportunity for high school students and their parents to meet with representatives of the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

Each of the academies will make a presentation followed by one-on-one discussions with the academy representatives and cadet/midshipmen present. Congressional staffers will be on hand to provide information about the nomination processes followed by each congressional office.

Academy Information Day 2009 will take place on Saturday, September 26, from 10:00 a.m. until 12:30 p.m., at the Experimental Aircraft Association, 3000 Poberezny Road in Oshkosh.

For further information please contact my Fond du Lac office at 1-800-242-4883.

Keep Current With Issue Updates!

Would you like to be notified about key votes and activities in the House of Representatives? If you would like to receive periodic updates on issues of interest to you, such as agriculture, health care or energy, please sign up at:

<http://petri.house.gov/subscribe.shtml>

To unsubscribe from this newsletter, follow this link:
<http://petri.house.gov/unsubscribe.shtml>