



Opening Statement for January 29, 2009
Small Business Committee Roundtable
***“Investing in Small Business: Jumpstarting
the Engines of our Economy”***

(As Prepared)

I am pleased to open this roundtable, “Investing in Small Business: Jumpstarting the Engines of our Economy.” Today’s roundtable is exciting for me because I now have the privilege of chairing this Committee, and this is our first meeting of the Congress – the first of many. I would like to begin by thanking eleven panelists for making the time to participate in this roundtable, as well as Senator Kerry and Senator Snowe for their past leadership on this Committee. I commit to continue their tradition of working in a bipartisan fashion.

We are making history on this Committee in the 111th Congress with two women in the leadership positions. This is appropriate given that women-owned firms have been the fastest-growing of all small businesses. I look forward to working with our new members Senator Jean Shaheen of New Hampshire, Senator Kay Hagan of North Carolina and Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi.

FOCUS OF ROUNDTABLE

The purpose of today’s roundtable is to hear from the small-business community – business owners and advocates from organizations representing members who are small businesses. We want to hear how this Committee, the Congress, and the Federal government can be better partners in creating the best possible environment for entrepreneurs to succeed.

Small businesses are the job creators in this country, and investing in small businesses is in our collective best interest. We have already heard from Wall Street and corporate giants. Today, I want to hear from small businesses – the engines that drive our economy and create our jobs.

The geographical makeup of our participants for this roundtable makes it somewhat different from other roundtables. I am also pleased that we were able to bring together a mix of associations, chambers of commerce, and individual business owners. I am particularly proud to welcome participants from Louisiana – George Swift and D’Juan (DE-WAN) Hernandez. They have done an admirable job of helping our state on the tough road to recovery after the 2005 hurricanes, and more recently, Gustav and Ike. In fact, it is hard to believe given the devastation of those hurricanes that in today’s economy, Louisiana is doing well by comparison to so many states. That’s not to say that the subprime lending crisis has not impacted us too – it has. But we are luckier than most. And on this Committee, we have the two extremes. Whereas Louisiana has unemployment of less than two percent, the state of Michigan, represented on this Committee by

my friend Senator Levin, has the highest unemployment rate in the nation – more than ten percent. His constituents are suffering greatly.

NEED FOR REAL SOLUTIONS

Under the leadership of Senator Kerry and Senator Snowe, this Committee held several hearings and roundtables last year to identify how the credit crunch was impacting small businesses. Since that time, however, the “crunch” has deepened – it is now described as a “crisis.” Many of the problems and solutions from even a month ago have changed. For example, on Tuesday, the Department of Labor released new unemployment numbers. It pains me to say that 2 million Americans lost their jobs in the last four months of 2008, and the nation’s unemployment rate now stands at 7.2 percent. This week alone nearly 100,000 layoffs have been announced around the country, including Boeing with 10,000 employees, Starbucks with as many as 6,700 employees and Target with 600 employees. During this difficult economic time, there are also great opportunities for small businesses. Without small businesses, we cannot begin to get those people back to work.

CONCLUSION

As we talk about solutions today, feel free to not limit your comments to just the SBA. While it is true that this Committee has direct legislative jurisdiction over the Small Business Administration, I would like this Committee – under my leadership – to be a true advocate for small businesses on a broader range of tax, regulatory and policy issues.

Feedback on SBA services and programs is important to us as the agency is the primary Federal agency for promoting small business interests. SBA will also be a key driver for our economic recovery. However, my colleagues and I also want to work with other relevant committees to truly help small businesses. For example, this is your chance to speak out on the TARP funds and whether the government’s efforts, so far, are reaching you.

We would also like to know: Do you need capital? Can you get capital? Are you forced to use credit cards? How are you adjusting your business plans given changes in consumer spending and consumer confidence? Can you keep your employees, or can you hire? Which tax programs or Federal regulations are hurting your business?

Given the scope of the challenges we are facing, there are countless questions which need answers. I hope that today’s roundtable can provide us with some of these answers – and real solutions to these problems.

After my colleagues make opening statements, I will ask each of you to briefly introduce yourselves. Please give us your name and the business or organization you represent. Following the introductions, I, or my colleagues, will ask questions and give you a chance to weigh in. If you do have a comment, please turn your card on its side. I will then call on you to speak for a couple of minutes. If anyone has statements or other information they would like to submit, we will keep the record open for two weeks. Again, thank you for being here.