

Transportation bill, economy dominate town hall discussion

Written by April Peregoy



Gathering at the Pizza p.a.d. Thursday morning, Feb. 26, a group of about 15-20 people came to the town hall meeting with State Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg for an update on the current legislative session and to voice their own concerns on state issues.

An unusual break in the legislative session allowed Sonnenberg to spend all day Thursday touring the district and talking with constituents.

Before his tour began, Sonnenberg said he anticipates the economy to be first and foremost on people's minds, and the Holyoke crowd did not disappoint him. But first, before taking questions, the state rep. explained and denounced the transportation bill that was passed by the House on Wednesday, Feb. 25.

Known as the FASTER initiative (Funding Advancement for Surface Development and Economic Recovery), Senate Bill 108 was introduced by Rep. Joe Rice (D) of Littleton. The bill increases vehicle registration fees by an average \$31 a year, for each vehicle, for the first year it goes into effect and \$42 in subsequent years.

The bill is intended to stimulate the economy as well as fix many roads and bridges in need of repairs around the state. Supporters say it could create as many as 8,000 new construction jobs.

However, Sonnenberg, along with his fellow Republicans and some Democrats, voted against the bill, calling it an unfair tax on Coloradans.

"It is unfair because it wasn't voted on by us," said Sonnenberg on Thursday morning, adding the bill gets around the required public vote on taxes by calling it a "fee."

He went on to give other reasons why the bill is unfair, saying it will hurt farmers and ranchers more than anyone else in the state because they own more vehicles. At the same time, Sonnenberg predicts little of the money generated will be used for projects in his district. "Transportation money doesn't seem to leave the I-25 corridor," he said.

As an example, he noted the allotted federal stimulus money that will be given to CDOT is not expected to greatly benefit the northeastern plains. "Out of the 8,000 miles my district covers, we will only receive funding for 11 miles of road—and that is on I-76," he said.

However, Sonnenberg said he will continue to fight for the district's roads and bridges.

Those present Thursday morning had questions on what the state government is doing to help get the economy back on track. Though he said he doesn't like to get too partisan during town hall meetings, Sonnenberg was openly critical of the Democrat-controlled state government and its actions.

"As families, we may have to tighten our belts when things get tough. I believe the

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government should have to do the same thing,” he said.

More government spending and regulations, he said, “quite frankly won’t create jobs. We are the ones who create jobs. Government needs to step back and let the market drive the truck.”

Pizza p.a.d. owner Pat Vasa told Sonnenberg he believes partisanship is largely to blame for the current economic situation, adding the only way to move forward is for the two parties to work together.

Sonnenberg said he agrees with Vasa, but added he feels partisanship divides are worse now than ever before.

Despite the sombering discussion, Sonnenberg ended the meeting on a positive note, saying, “We’re in tough economic times. But the good thing about rural Colorado is, when the state has a huge economic downturn, we’re not affected as much. Of course, we don’t get the booms either, but I’m confident in the end, we will come out of this much better than the Front Range will.”