

TOWN HALL: SUZANNE BONAMICI

Transcription & photos: RANDY SANDERS

On June 14, Oregon First District Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici conducted a town hall in Columbia County at the Scappoose City Hall. For those unable to attend, here are some of her remarks on the following issues.

ON INDUSTRIAL HEMP:

“We were able to pass an amendment recently that allows the farming of industrial hemp. This is not marijuana. The 2009 legislature in Oregon was one of the states that said this is a crop that is legal to

have. The product is used from everything from fabric to cereal, to beauty products, to papers to rope. One of our colleagues in the Oregon Senate said ‘it’s rope not dope.’ Which is an easy way to remember it. So this amendment simply says that our Drug Enforcement Agency can’t use its resources going after farmers who are growing a legal crop in a state that allows it like Oregon.



It's actually a really good crop because it doesn't take a lot of water, it doesn't take a lot of pesticides and it does really well. There's a tremendous market for it. All our companies who are making products with industrial hemp have to import it from either Canada or China or other countries. It's a good agricultural crop. That passed with strong bipartisan support. And frankly, I'd rather our Drug Enforcement Agency use its resources to go after serious problems like meth, heroin, cocaine rather than a crop that's legal to have."

EDUCATION:

"We've also been making a lot of progress, because I'm on both the science committee and the education committee. We talk a lot about STEM education: science, technology, engineering and math. And I have Washington County in my district, so a lot of high tech. Also, we do have to acknowledge the importance of these jobs for the future in science, technology, engineering and math. It's a pretty broad category. I've been working with a bipartisan conference that I've helped start to make sure that we're actually educating people to be creative and innovative in those areas, as well as to try and to get more girls interested when they're in school with science, technology, engineering and math. That is by incorporating the "A" for arts into STEM learning. It's really getting some attention because we're engaging more students.

Also a lot of the research shows that if you want creativity and innovation you have to educate the right brain as well as the left brain. So that's been really positive and we're seeing a lot of business support as well in the business community, the U.S. Patent Office, because we really want to educate innovators, not just people who can put things together, people who can invent the next new discovery.

So that's been really positive. We are working, doing what we can to find common ground. But there's several things that we have not been able to get through. One of them is immigration reform. This comes up all around, in different ways, particularly in Yamhill County and places where we have a lot of agriculture. There are different needs in the agriculture community. We have a lot of agriculture in Willamette Valley. In Yamhill County a lot of it is specialty crops and grapes and a high-end nursery industry.

The high tech industry wants immigration industry as well. I don't know what's going to happen with that. The Senate passed a comprehensive bill. I'm quite certain that if something comes up in the House, it will require something to secure the borders. I'm extremely concerned about this proliferation of children coming across the borders. That's a really serious crisis right now. But also border security has to be reasonable and it has to make sense. A lot of people who are in this country without documentation are here because they overstayed visas. So no matter how you build a fence or no matter how many guards you put on the border, you aren't solving the whole issue. So we need to have a smart way to secure the borders and also understand the needs

of various communities. We also have seen a lot of families torn apart. So on immigration reform, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said it would be overall good for the economy. No one's interested in just automatically letting people become citizens. There's really stringent requirements for people to become citizens under the Senate bill and I don't know what's going to go through in the House. Last week changed things a little bit with the Majority Leader losing his primary election. Some people say it's because immigration reform, some people say it's not.

Tax reform is another big issue that we talk about but we have not completed a tax reform bill. There was one that was introduced in the House by Representative Cantor. And our own Senator Wyden is working in the Senate on the committee that is going to be working on tax reform. We're hearing from people about what their priorities are. A couple that I hear a lot are home mortgage interest deduction. Which is important, to see our housing market start to thrive again we need to make sure we aren't standing in the way of people being able to afford homes. Also making charitable deductions. Our nonprofit organizations in faith communities really do a lot in our communities and if we end the charitable deductions we'll see a pretty significant drop-off on what those nonprofit organizations can do."

VETERANS HEALTH ISSUES:

"We've been hearing a lot in the town halls meetings that I've held across the District from veterans, some are very pleased at the care they're getting, many are not. We're extremely concerned about, of course, the wait times. But I'm also appalled that some of the Veterans Administrations have been cheating by making it look like veterans haven't had to wait when in fact they have. There been a couple bills that have passed both the House and the Senate but they're not the same so they're going to conference committees and they're really designed to get at these issues. Of course with the acting Secretary coming in, we are hoping for leadership and the legislation. The Senate bill was supported by Bernie Sanders from Vermont and Senate John McCain from Arizona. You couldn't get farther apart than those two, so that's strong bipartisan support. I think 97 of the 100 senators supported it and similarly I think the House vote was unanimous. So we are working on getting that done, but I have it in the 'left undone' section because it still hasn't passed and been signed into law. And we really have to work on getting it implemented.

I want to say that there have been a lot of veterans, in addition to our World War II, Korean War and Viet Nam veterans, there's a lot of people coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with a multitude of challenges. Physical and mental health issues so it's really important that we address those needs.

One of the things that I've learned when I was out at the VA is that the scheduling software that they're using is DOS based. Anybody remember that? It's from the eighties! (*Editors note: DOS software -- an acronym -- is an abbreviation for Disc Operating System. Now, no longer used in*

99% of all business and organizational computer operating systems, it was used primarily on Windows 95, 98 and Millennium Edition from 1981 till about 1995). So one of the things that is in this legislation in the House and the Senate is, let's get them some technology that is up to date. They are trying to schedule thousands of appointments with an antiquated operating system."

HIGHWAY TRUST FUND:

"The Highway Trust Fund is a federal pot of money for transportation projects that address transportation infrastructure. It's about out of money for a couple of reasons. One of them is it's funded by gas tax and gas tax has not been increased since the early-90's. Also people are driving more fuel efficient cars, which happens to be a good thing, but we don't have the funding in the Highway Trust Fund. We've heard from ODOT, the Oregon Department of Transportation, about how if we can't get funding in the Trust Fund, how that's going to affect many, many different projects in Oregon. So there's lots of different proposals on the table that we're talking about. In our delegation there's some great champions on transportation.

Finally I want to mention, because it's been in the news so much and awfully close to home, Reynolds High School. Recently there was a 15-year-old student who was killed... there's a gentlemen with a 'support the Second Amendment shirt' on (*editor's note: Congresswomen Bonamici made reference to a man in the audience who was wearing a t-shirt that had a reference to the support of the Second Amendment*) absolutely there are things we can do that does not infringe Second Amendment rights. We have to come together. We are a diverse country, but we have to find how we can address this serious issue.

Seattle Pacific University just the week before, a young man from Beaverton 19-years-old graduated from Westview High School and went to Seattle Pacific University and was involved in the shooting out there (*Editor's note: Paul Lee, a freshman at Seattle Pacific University and graduate from Beaverton's Westview High School, died after from gunshot wounds after arriving at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. Two other individuals were also wounded*). So let's figure out what we need to do, where we need to intervene. Is it more mental health? Is it high school counselors? Is it psychotropic medication? We have to address this issue somehow, coming together as a community and figure out how we can stop our kids from being killed when they go to school. It's a really serious issue. I remember going to a hearing after Newtown. A terrible, terrible situation there. And I have to say, if that didn't inspire Congress to do something... We have to come together and figure out a way to address this issue."



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT IN COLUMBIA COUNTY:

I see a lot of potential. There's other projects that we can be talking about. There are ways that we can build the economy and not contribute to carbon emissions. The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has some new regulations that they've just

announced for power plants. They're phased in for the next several years. The end date isn't until 2030. But it's really a state by state approach that reflects that states are different. Oregon has been a leader. I assure you that there will be a lot of pushback to those rules but the EPA really took a regional approach saying, states you can do whatever you need to do whether it be develop new technologies for carbon sequestration and those technologies now that there is a requirement for power plants while be developed. Or you can move to more renewable energies like Oregon has done. So they've taken that state by state approach and it's phased in not till 2030. So it's a step and Oregon has been a leader. I'm a little concerned that we haven't been able to do a meaningful extension of the production tax credits for renewable energy. That's a priority of mine and a lot of Oregon delegation I know to make sure that our renewable businesses are able to thrive.

(I purposed one question to Congressman Bonanmici with her response).

Randy Sanders: Looking at this particular Congress -- who seems to have a tough time working across the aisle -- it's a reminder that a pro-business agenda is a bipartisan issue. Looking at Columbia County, who has excellent deep water shipping capabilities and some of the best river front property on the West Coast, what can be accomplished on the Congressional level to make Columbia County even more attractive to lure new businesses to locate here who provide family wage jobs?

“What can be done at the federal level to help Columbia County and it's a great place to live. What can we do to increase its potential? I think that a lot of what can be done at the federal level is making sure that we are getting things like the Water Resources Development Act through, the Farm Bill through that encourage development, encourage farming and having a

stable economy. The housing market, I guess that is starting to come back. I know Senator Johnson is working on getting the college in Columbia County. There's a lot that we can do.

Oregon Aero (*Editor's note: Oregon Aero – founded in 1989 – is an aviation company located at the Scappoose Airport specializing in “making flying more comfortable.” They create “innovative, effective solutions to problems that arise when the human body interfaces with manufactured hardware.”*) I was just at a ceremony with a Pacific NW Defense Coalition recognizing them for their work with the veterans, hiring veterans and accommodating the Guard. So we have some great potential here. By having economic policy that encourages people, whether it be transportation, to make sure people can get around safely. Roads and bridges that work, that we have functioning ports. And then the certainty and that come from things like tax reform, economic stability. I'm really concerned right now about what's happening in Iraq. You wonder what that has to do with Columbia County? It has to do with economic stability. If we are in another global conflict, that causes people to hesitate with investment. So making sure that we have a good tax policy, making sure, as you say, we have the bipartisan support for bills like the Farm Bill, Water Research and Development Act, transportation and infrastructure. And then finally, I want to say this system of education.

You've heard concerns here about some of our students that making sure that we have a good, strong system of education and opportunity for students to get through our schools and are able to go to college – hopefully PCC in Columbia County!

I started at Community College. I went to community college for two years before I went to the University of Oregon and then University of Oregon Law School. Making sure that we have educational opportunities for students so that they get out without tremendous student loan debt and start a business or grow a business. So all of those things will help. And of course recognizing small business because there are a lot of small business that are truly the back bone of America. Making sure that they have access to capital. The first bill that I signed on to in Congress was to help small business have access to capital and in the legislature as well.”