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Veto Override Would Halt Washington County OLF

The House took the first step toward overriding President Bush's veto of a key defense bill today, which would ensure a halt to the Navy's proposed outlying landing field in eastern North Carolina's Washington County.

If the Navy wants to move forward with an OLF, it should now be clear that they will need the support of the community.

This week, the House again approved the FY 2008 National Defense Authorization Bill, taking the first step toward overriding President Bush's veto. The Senate is expected to vote on the bill next week.

Last month, the conference report on the FY 2008 National Defense Authorization Bill included language repealing "the authority for construction of an outlying landing field at Washington County, North Carolina." The bill won overwhelming support from the House and Senate, but was vetoed by President Bush.

Bush cited concerns that a little-publicized provision would tie up the billions of dollars in assets of the current Iraq government in court claims filed by victims of Saddam Hussein's regime. The provision would have allowed victims of state-sponsored terrorism to sue foreign governments in U.S. courts. A bipartisan "fix" provides a waiver for the Iraqi government.

If approved by the House and Senate, Bush is expected to sign the compromise bill.

The Navy has already purchased more than 2,000 acres in Washington and Beaufort counties as part of a 30,000-acre OLF the Navy says it needs in order to train pilots to land on aircraft carriers. The proposed site lies just west of an area that was established specifically as a waterfowl sanctuary where thousands of birds winter annually.

Once the bill is signed into law, I will ask Navy Secretary Donald C. Winter what the Navy plans to do with the land that has already been purchased.

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In addition to the OLF language, the legislation also includes provisions ensuring that the military pay raise, as well as special pays and bonuses for the troops, are retroactive to January 1.

I am pleased that our brave men and women in uniform will now be getting the pay raise of 3.5 percent, as well as other critically needed benefits, that are included in this legislation. We worked to make sure that, under the bill, the pay raise and the special pays and bonuses for the troops were made retroactive to January 1.

The American military is the greatest in the world, and I was proud to back legislation that will make our armed forces stronger and our nation more secure. This bill protects our troops and their families and helps ensure that our fighting men and women have all the resources they need and deserve.

The Defense Authorization bill authorizes new resources for additional Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs,) up-armored Humvees and body armor. The legislation also includes resources for efforts to stop Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) that have proven to be a threat to American troops in Iraq.

The legislation also includes critical support for troops and their families by providing a pay raise for troops that goes above the President's request and blocking fee increases in the military health care program (TRICARE). Additionally, the bill includes the Wounded Warrior Act, which responds to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal by improving the care of injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Defense Authorization bill takes steps to remedy the Army readiness crisis in America. Army readiness has dropped to unprecedented levels, and Army National Guard units have, on average, only 40 percent of their required equipment. Furthermore, many stateside units are not fully equipped and would not be considered ready if called upon to respond during an emergency.

The measure passed in the House today helps restore our nation's military readiness by creating a Strategic Readiness Fund to address equipment shortfalls, fully funding the Army's and Marine Corps' equipment reset requirements, and authorizing new resources to provide the National Guard and Reserve critically needed equipment.

Help with Heating Bills on the Way

The Bush Administration released \$450 million in energy assistance to help seniors and working families keep the heat on this winter.

I'm certainly pleased that the Bush Administration responded to calls from Congress to release emergency funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which will help seniors and working families keep the heat on this winter.

North Carolinian families will benefit from \$ 2.8 million in help with heating. This assistance is critical because Americans using heating oil are expected to pay more than \$2,000 per family – over three times the 2001 costs.

This type of bipartisan cooperation bodes well for American families as we work quickly to address the serious challenges of high energy prices and the slowing economy this year.

The 110th Congress included \$2.6 billion in LIHEAP funding in the omnibus recently enacted – a \$400 million increase over last year.

Community Improvement Grant Program Moves Forward

This week the House approved the HOPE VI Improvement and Reauthorization Act. The bill reauthorizes the highly successful HOPE VI program for eight years, authorizing \$800 million a year, and includes numerous improvements to the program.

During debate I spoke on the Floor to urge that Main Street Grants, like the \$1 million Henderson was awarded, remain a part of the program. Here's the speech I made:

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the amendment offered by my friend and colleague from Florida, Mr. Mahoney.

Mr. Speaker, I represent the First Congressional District of North Carolina – the fifteenth poorest district in the country. One of the towns in my district is Henderson.

Last year, Henderson was one of three towns across the country to receive the HOPE VI Main Street Grant that this bill attempts to remove.

As we all know, HOPE VI Main Street Grants seek to revitalize and rejuvenate older, downtown business districts while retaining the area's traditional and Historic character.

Additionally, the purpose of the HOPE VI Main Street Program is to provide assistance to smaller communities in the development of affordable housing and the revitalization and reconfiguration of obsolete commercial offices or buildings into sustainable and affordable housing.

Mr. Speaker, towns like Henderson, North Carolina need these grants to reinvigorate their communities and to spur outside commercial investment.

I want to thank my friend from Florida for offering this amendment. I strongly support it and urge its adoption. The point is that HOPE VI Main Street grants are needed in Rural America.

Thank you Mr. Speaker. I yield back the balance of my time.

The bill provides a number of important provisions aimed at revitalizing communities and improving access to housing.

For example, the bill requires that all public housing units proposed for demolition or disposition under a HOPE VI project be replaced on a one-for-one basis. And, it provides residents displaced by a HOPE VI project with three housing choices: a revitalized unit on the site of the original public housing location; a revitalized unit in the jurisdiction of the public housing agency; or a housing choice voucher, which can be used in areas with lower concentrations of poverty.

The bill also requires that all replacement housing as part of a HOPE VI project be built in accordance with the national Green Communities criteria checklist or a substantially equivalent standard as determined by the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Green Communities is a well-respected, widely-utilized industry standard for green affordable housing and is already required or used by a number of cities and states across the country. Hundreds of community-based developers are achieving Green Communities or similar criteria on a cost-effective basis. Studies have found that the cost of incorporating green standards is only between 2 to 4 percent – and the increased energy efficiency can result in lower utility costs for residents.

Wilson Senior Center Funding

During the annual budgeting process, I was able to earmark \$250,000 needed to help expand the Gee-Corbett Village Senior Center.

With an aging Baby Boom generation, there's a growing need for senior centers and the many services they provide. This funding should help to ensure that the Gee-Corbett Village Senior Center can meet this challenge.

The funding was earmarked in the FY 2008 Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations bill. The bill was recently approved by Congress and signed into law in December.

Currently, the senior center has about 2,000 square feet of space but requires double that amount in order to meet the North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services' standards for "Centers of Excellence" and "Centers for Merit."

The senior center is operated by Wilson Community Improvement Association, Inc., a non-profit organization with a mission and goal to improve the quality of life for low- to moderate-income residents in Wilson and the surrounding areas.

The senior center serves as a congregate meals site five days a week, offers a variety of recreational, educational, and health-promoting activities including bible study, exercise class, adult basic education and information sessions.

Gee-Corbett Village and its Senior Center opened in 1980 through the efforts of Fannie Corbett, Blackson's mother, and Carey Gee, along with the assistance of local churches. Gee-Corbett Village includes 38 elderly housing units and is located on Butterfield Lane, which was named after my father, a Wilson city councilman in the 1950s.

Funding for Albemarle Region

During the annual budget process, I was able to secure more than \$18 million in federal funds for eight important projects throughout the Albemarle region.

The projects include a new rescue diver training facility, a small business incubator and other economic development projects, increased funding for operating the Great Dismal Swamp Canal, airport improvements, E-911 system improvements and improvements at Elizabeth City State University (ECSU).

The \$18.1 million were earmarked by Butterfield in the Consolidated Appropriations Act that was recently signed into law. The bill funds the annual operating costs for most federal agencies and programs.

The largest earmark was \$13.3 million for construction of a new U.S. Coast Guard rescue diver training facility in Elizabeth City.

The current facility is a converted 25-meter long, four-lane, four- to eight-foot-deep recreation pool built in 1948. Due to the small size of the pool, only one student in a class of 80 is able to train at any given time. The depth of the pool also eliminates the ability to simulate 15-foot helicopter jumps divers are asked to perform in real life situations. The current facility also lacks any classroom space and has limited space for locker rooms and storage.

Simply put, it's an outdated facility which badly needs to be replaced. The facility has never met the needs of the Coast Guard and potentially puts rescuers and victims at greater risk.

The building is primarily used by USCG Aviation Technical Training Center (ATTC). ATTC conducts Aviation Survival Technician (AST) rescue swimmer training here for 700 students annually. Additionally, the swimming pool serves as a platform for USCG Air Station Elizabeth City's Rescue Swimmers' refresher training and as a testing and evaluation basin for the USCG Aircraft Repair & Supply Center's Aviation Life Support Equipment division.

The limited depth of the pool and the size of the deep end also restrict AST students' ability to practice full parachute detangling procedures, and it allows for only one type of rescue approach for scenarios involving raft operations. Furthermore, the facility lacks the capacity to allow for the simulation of a variety of ocean conditions.

All of these deficiencies will be address with a new dedicated facility which would include a 50-meter by 25-meter pool with a 12-foot deep end, training equipment, locker rooms, bathrooms, classrooms and space for parachute packing training and for drying parachutes. The facility would also include the equipment needed to simulate a variety of water conditions. The existing facility would remain open as a recreational pool – its original and more appropriate use.

I also secured significantly increased funding for the Great Dismal Swamp Canal. About \$1.54 million was earmarked for operation of the facility – an increase of about \$600,000 over last year's funding.

The historic Great Dismal Swamp Canal attracts a huge number of visitors and provides a tremendous economic impact for the region.

Completed in 1805, the 22-mile-long canal runs from Chesapeake Bay, Virginia to Elizabeth City. It is federally recognized as part of the Underground Railroad Network, and it played a significant role in the War of 1812 as well as the Civil War.

I also secured \$1.6 million for the development of a coastal surveillance by Airship Management Services, which operates out of Elizabeth City. The funding will support a joint effort with the Navy and Coast Guard to develop an affordable and effective coastal surveillance airship.

An existing airship will be equipped with advanced sensors and deployed over the Florida Straight between Cuba and Florida for six months to test the capability to detect threats or illegal activity by aircraft or ocean-going vessels.

I was also able to secure \$500,000 needed to complete the purchase and installation of an instrument landing system (ILS) at the Northeastern Regional Airport in Edenton. In 2005, the FAA informed the airport administrators that the \$1 million previously secured to purchase and install the ILS was insufficient.

I secured \$500,000 for the Martin County Economic Development Corp. to support the development of hydrogen fuel cell technology. Working with Robersonville-based Microcell, the funding will be used to develop the technology and processes needed to produce low-cost fuel cells with a wide range of practical applications. It is expected that Microcell will eventually provide 120 new, good-paying manufacturing jobs at its facility.

As our nation looks for answers to our energy problems, hydrogen fuel cells represent an enormous and promising opportunity. Manufacturing fuel cells here in eastern North Carolina is exciting because it provides an innovative solution and jobs that are sorely needed.

I also secured \$282,000 for the development of a small business incubator in Elizabeth City by the River City Community Development Corp. The funding would be used as part of a \$1.2 million construction project with the aim of supporting the growth and development of minority-, disadvantaged-, veteran- and women-owned small businesses.

I was able to earmark \$282,000 needed to strengthen and improve Chowan County's Emergency-911 system (E-911). The funds are needed for improvements including a security system for the emergency operations center as well as electronic equipment and software related to E-911.

Finally, I secured \$380,000 for needed improvements at ECSU. The funds will be used to help the university replace its blackboards with whiteboards and overhead projectors, create a wireless network and to make repairs and improvements to Lester Hall, which has a leaky roof and needs replacement window as well as a new heating and cooling system.

Honoring Our Troops and Veterans

This week, the House again took up the Military Reservist and Veterans Small Business Reauthorization and Opportunity Act of 2007.

The House passed an earlier version of this bill by a vote of 407-2 on December 6. This measure makes minor changes to the version of the bill passed by the Senate on December 19. The Senate is expected to take up this version and send it to the President.

Among the major provisions of the bill are:

- Increases the authorization of the Small Business Administration's Office of Veteran Business Development by \$4.4 million, which works to maximize the availability and usability of small business programs for veterans, service-disabled veterans, reserve members, and their dependents or Survivors for the next two years;

- Facilitates the coordination of all federal agencies to focus attention on increasing the success rate of and opportunities for veteran-owned businesses by creating an Interagency Taskforce on Veteran Small Business;

- Creates a new loan initiative providing veterans with 7(a) small business loans at 50 percent of the fees of other small businesses;

- Makes economic injury military deployment disaster loans of up to \$50,000 without requiring collateral from a loan applicant up from \$5,000;

- Improves the Military Reservist Economic Injury Disaster Loan program;

- Increases the number of Veterans Business Outreach Centers across the country and identifies areas that are in need of assistance to ensure that veterans and reservists in every region are able to keep their businesses afloat; and,

- Provides grants to the SBA's Small Business Development Centers to expand its outreach to veterans, many of whom are unaware of the federal programs or have found it difficult to take advantage of them.