

Iowa Politics Roundup: Overflow Crowds Pack Town-Hall Meetings

Written by Lynn Campbell
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U.S. Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) heard an earful in four town-hall meetings held this week across the central part of the state, with a majority of the large crowds telling him to put the brakes on Democratic plans for health-care reform.

At congressional town-hall gatherings across the country, opponents of the Democrats' health-care-reform proposals have been loud, angry, and in some cases involved in physical altercations with those who are supportive of President Barack Obama and Democrats. U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) experienced some of that shouting and booing during his meetings in Des Moines and eastern Iowa.

The largely conservative and Republican audience that attended Grassley's town-hall meetings in Adel, Afton, Panora, and Winterset were forceful in their condemnation of Obama and in some cases said they would vote against Grassley in 2010 if he does not stop his efforts to fashion a bipartisan health-care compromise. They occasionally mocked the few dissenting Democratic and liberal attendees who implored Grassley to embrace a government-run insurance option as a part of health-care reform.

But for the most part, the events were civil and respectful - and full. The meetings in Adel and Winterset were moved out of the public library and into a park after it became clear the large

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crowds would overwhelm those venues. (About 300 showed up for a morning event in Winterset; nearly 1,000 braved the heat in Adel.) The meetings in Afton and Panora were indoors and featured standing-room-only crowds of around 300 and almost 500, respectively.

"I don't want a government-run plan," Grassley said in Afton to enthusiastic applause, using a line he repeated throughout the day, each time to loud cheers.

The events attracted national media attention, with Grassley's town hall in Winterset carried live on CNN. *The New York Times*, Fox News, and *Roll Call* were all there too, along with representatives from AARP, Divided We Fail, Iowans for Tax Relief, and the American Future Fund, and people who participated in anti-tax "tea parties."

Grassley quickly drew criticism from Democrats and the national media after he said in Winterset that "you have every right to fear" a health-care bill that has counseling for the end of life, and "we should not have a government program that determines you're gonna pull the plug on grandma."

Bob Krause, one of the Democratic candidates who hopes to challenge Grassley for U.S. Senate, made his cable-TV debut when he was interviewed on Rachel Maddow's MSNBC show and called Grassley's comments "outrageous."

U.S. Representative Bruce Braley (D-Waterloo) accused Grassley of spreading fear among seniors by comments he made about health-care reform as it relates to end-of-life decisions. "I'm shocked that Senator Grassley would reinforce the ridiculous claim that paying doctors to discuss end-of-life care with their patients is somehow 'pulling the plug on grandma,'" Braley said.

Grassley said the Senate Finance Committee is working to avoid unintended consequences and dropped end-of-life provisions from consideration because of the way they could be misinterpreted and incorrectly implemented. "Maybe others can defend a bill like the Pelosi bill that leaves major issues open to interpretation, but I can't," he said.

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Meanwhile, Grassley, who's been part of the "gang of six" on the Senate Finance Committee working on a bipartisan plan for the past five months, acknowledged at the town-hall meetings that a bipartisan plan for health-care reform might not happen and that he may soon be excluded from negotiations if Obama decides to push forward with a partisan plan.

Third Democrat Enters U.S. Senate Race

Former state Senator Tom Fiegen of Clarence formally announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate during Friday press conferences in Tipton, Davenport, Cedar Rapids, and Des Moines.

He joins Bob Krause of Fairfield and Sal Mohamed of Sioux City in vying for the right to challenge Grassley, who has held his seat for almost 30 years.

Fiegen is an attorney and economist who represents family farms and small businesses in bankruptcy court. He said he'll make the economic issues of full employment, health care for all who need it, and a ban on financial piracy the centerpieces of his campaign - an economic platform that he calls "Fiegenomics."

"Before we can solve our other problems, we need to create enough new jobs in America that everyone who wants to work can get a job," said Fiegen, who is calling for a renewal of the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act.

Union Head Preps 'War Room' in Advance of Government-Reorganization Discussion

As Iowa lawmakers prepare to launch a study of how to make state government run more

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efficiently, the man who represents many of the state's employees is gearing up to find cost-cutting measures that don't include eliminating programs or personnel.

"I don't believe there are any programs that need to be cut that will make state government more efficient," said Danny Homan, president of AFSCME Iowa Council 61. "I don't believe that there's an excess in staff which in turn will make government more efficient. I believe we have to take a look at some of the things we looked at when Governor Vilsack was in office, and that's how to deliver the services the public deserves and demands in the most efficient manner, and that doesn't always mean eliminating staff or programs."

Homan said he decided this week to "turn his conference room into the war room," bringing in AFSCME members from across the state to form at least four committees that will look for efficiencies in their state agencies.

"They're the experts, not me," Homan said. "I don't go to work in a state agency every day."

The legislature's interim State Government Reorganization Commission will hold its first meeting September 9 in Des Moines. The commission is charged with overhauling state government for the first time since the 1980s, when the number of state departments was reduced from 64 to 24.

Representative Mary Mascher (D-Iowa City), chair of the House State Government Committee, will co-chair the commission. She expects anything the commission decides to do will be met with some resistance, but she still views this as "an exciting time, because budget constraints provide opportunity."

Mascher said the state can't keep doing things the way it's doing them. "Government has done a lot over the years, and it seems like every year we add on a little bit more without ever taking anything away," she said. "This is a good opportunity for us to look at what is working and to make recommendations that we believe will be in the best interest of all Iowans."

Mascher and co-chair Senator Staci Appel (D-Ackworth) both said some cost savings can be

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found relatively quickly - through joint purchasing and eliminating duplicative boards and commissions, for example - while other systemic changes could take years to have an impact.

Besides bulk purchasing and looking at boards and commissions, Mascher and Appel said they are interested in expanding e-government by providing more forms and documents for citizens online and consolidating data storage.

"We haven't upgraded our systems and consolidated them ever on the electronic side, so I think there's a lot of savings to be found there," Appel said.

Representative Doug Struyk (R-Council Bluffs) will also sit on the commission. A former bureau chief in the Iowa Department of Agriculture, Struyk said he is "ready to dig into it" and has seen firsthand the result of an inefficient government.

"I remember in late April and early May watching the loading dock in the Wallace Building fill up with computers and printers and I said to my supervisor, 'What's going on?'" Struyk said of his time in the department.

Struyk said he didn't get a good answer from his supervisor and eventually found out from the purchasing department that this happens every year. "People have excess money in their budgets, they don't want people to know they didn't spend it, so they spend it on computers and things," he said. "That to me is a waste of taxpayer dollars. I'm going into it looking for things like that."

Economic Advisers Give Governor Hope About the Economy

A smaller number of lost jobs is among several positive signs that Governor Chet Culver said gave him hope during a meeting of the Council of Economic Advisers.

"I'm encouraged overall from what I heard today in terms of hopefully turning the corner soon,"

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said Culver, who noted that Moody's said Iowa will be one of the first 12 states to recover from the recession. "If you look at where we were, if you look at how deep this recession was, I'm encouraged to see some of the trends showing improvement."

Ann Wagner of Iowa Workforce Development said that while many say this is the worst recession since the Great Depression, that isn't true in Iowa; it was worse in the 1980s. And while June's 6.2 percent unemployment rate was the highest since January 1987, Wagner said: "We're not getting the rash [of layoffs] that we saw in the first quarter of 2008. They seemed to have slowed a bit."

Amy Harris of the Iowa Department of Revenue pointed out that while Iowa Leading Indicators Index fell in June for the 15th straight month, the drop of 0.4 percent was the smallest since October 2008. She said decreases have been shrinking in the last two months, and the index had three positive indicators for the first time since April 2008.

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service. IowaPolitics.com staff contributed to this report.