

Area Votes in Congress (The News Journal)

By Thomas Voting Reports

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WASHINGTON -- Here's how area members of Congress voted on major roll calls in the week ending June 27.

REPRESENTATIVES: Mike Castle, R-Del.; Wayne Gilchrest, R. Md.; Joe Sestak, D-Pa.; Joseph R. Pitts, R-Pa.; Frank A. LoBiondo, R-N.J.

SENATORS: Joe Biden, D-Del.; Tom Carper, D-Del.; Ben Cardin, D-Md.; Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md.; Arlen Specter, R-Pa.; Bob Casey, D-Pa.; Robert Menendez, D-N.J.; Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J.

HOUSE

DISABILITIES ACT EXPANSION: Voting 402 for and 17 against, the House on June 25 passed a bill (HR 3195) to negate Supreme Court decisions that have narrowed the types of disabilities and number of disabled workers protected by the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). The court has denied protection, for example, to persons who have taught themselves to perform their jobs and conduct other major activities even though afflicted by diseases such as epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, cancer and diabetes. The bill awaits Senate action.

George Miller, D-Calif., said the bill "stops the erosion of civil rights protections for people with disabilities while maintaining a reasonable solution supported by the business community."

No member spoke against the bill.

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Castle, LoBiondo, Sestak, Pitts

Voting no: None

Not voting: Gilchrest

CHILD-ABUSE PROGRAMS: Voting 318 for and 103 against, the House on June 25 passed a bill (HR 6358) that would authorize nearly \$1 billion through fiscal 2013 for federal programs to prevent and deal with the consequences of child abuse. The bill would set federal health and safety standards for residential treatment facilities that oversee teenagers with behavioral or emotional problems or mental-health disorders. The bill is now before the Senate.

George Miller, D-Calif., said: "With children's health and safety at risk, this federal rule is a necessary recognition that we are dealing with an emergency and we cannot wait for the states to act. These abuses have been going on for years. States have had time to act and in many instances they have failed to do so."

Bill Sali, R-Idaho, called the bill "simply unconscionable for those who respect the system of federalism long established in our nation. Most states already have systems in place to check the abuse that this legislation would supposedly address. Yet this legislation would trump those systems."

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Castle, LoBiondo, Sestak

Voting no: Pitts

Not voting: Gilchrest

MEDICARE DOCTOR PAYMENTS: Voting 355 for and 59 against, the House on June 24 passed a bill (HR 6331) that would avert the administration's 10.6 percent cut in Medicare payments set for July 1. The bill would increase those payments by 1.1 percent in January. The bill also would lower the copayment rate for mental- health coverage from 50 percent to 20 percent, the same rate as for physical care. The bill's projected \$19.8 billion, six-year cost would be offset mainly by cuts in the privately run, federally subsidized Medicare Advantage program.

Pete Stark, D-Calif., said: "Basically, this bill protects the physicians from 10 percent cuts. If you vote against it, you're voting to cut physicians by 10 percent."

Joe Barton, R-Texas, said Republicans were excluded from the drafting of the bill. "We have been in session now in this Congress almost 18 months. You would think that in that time period there could have been some legislative hearings."

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Castle, Gilchrest, LoBiondo, Sestak

Voting no: Pitts

Not voting: None

ALTERNATIVE MINIMUM TAX: Voting 233 for and 189 against, the House on June 25 sent the Senate a bill (HR 6275) to exempt 22 million middle-income households from the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) this year. To offset the Treasury's loss of \$61.5 billion in revenue, the bill would, in part, repeal certain tax breaks for oil and gas companies; change "carried interest" rules so that managers of investment partnerships and hedge funds would pay taxes at a 35 percent rather than 15 percent rate, and set the stage for more timely tax collection on payments from credit card firms to merchants.

The AMT was enacted in 1969 to prevent a few wealthy filers from using deductions, exemptions and shelters to avoid income taxes. Not indexed for inflation, the AMT has crept into middle-income brackets. Even with this fix, the AMT will add a projected \$2,400 per return to the 2008 tax bills of four million middle-income filers.

Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., said the cost of the bill should be offset by tax increases on corporations and investment managers, because "if we take \$61 billion out of the economy, we should not go to China and Japan once again and ask them to bail us out."

Jim McCrery, R-La., said the bill "represents a clear difference between the two parties when it comes to tax policy. Republicans believe Congress ought not raise taxes on one group in order to prevent a tax increase on another group."

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Gilchrest, Sestak

Voting no: Castle, LoBiondo, Pitts

Not voting: None

GOP TAX PLAN: Voting 199 for and 222 against, the House on June 25 defeated a GOP bid to strip HR 6275 (above) of \$61.5 billion in tax increases on certain equity managers and corporations, including oil companies. Democrats proposed the increases to "pay for" the bill's fix of the Alternative Minimum Tax in 2008. The GOP motion also sought to raise the mileage deduction for the use of personal vehicles for charitable purposes.

Jim McCrery, R-La., objected to tax increases on "the companies that produce the oil, the gasoline that we buy. Do we think that, if we increase taxes on them, they are just going to absorb that? They will pass it through to the consumer, which will mean higher gasoline prices."

Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., said McCrery "would have you believe that, if you take this (\$61.5 billion) out, you wouldn't have to put anything in. Well, what you're putting in is the future of our children and of our grandchildren."

A yes vote backed the GOP motion.

Voting yes: Castle, Gilchrest, LoBiondo, Pitts

Voting no: Sestak

Not voting: None

'USE IT OR LOSE IT': Voting 223 for and 195 against, the House on June 26 sent the Senate a bill (HR 6251) placing a "use it or lose it" mandate for oil companies to either drill on federal land they have leased or relinquish the right to do so. The bill was directed at dormant leases covering 68 million acres in the West and Alaska. The bill would deny new federal leases to companies not drilling on acreage already leased.

Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said: "Democrats do not oppose further drilling. All we are saying is that the oil and gas companies should utilize the 68 million acres currently available to drill on which contain, according to experts, over 100 billion barrels of oil."

Mary Fallin, R-Okla., called the bill "a sham" because "the Democratic leadership has done everything it can in past decades to stop leasing on 97 percent of federal offshore areas and 94 per cent of federal onshore areas. The true source of most nonproducing areas in America is the U.S. Congress."

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Castle, Gilchrest, LoBiondo, Sestak

Voting no: Pitts

Not voting: None

COMMUTER-FARE SUBSIDIES: Voting 322 for and 98 against, the House on June 26 sent the Senate a bill (HR 6052) authorizing \$1.7 billion in fiscal 2008-2009 for grants that public transit authorities would use to either reduce fares or expand services, with nearly 90 percent of the outlay allocated to urban areas of at least 50,000 population.

Rush Holt, D-N.J., said: "By taking public transportation the average American household could save \$6,251 and help reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 4,800 pounds per year. However, commuters need affordable, reliable access to public transportation."

Greg Walden, R-Ore., said the bill would "increase subsidies for public transit systems that reduce their fares and expand taxpayer-funded travel perks for federal employees" yet fails "to provide assistance to struggling school districts."

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Castle, Gilchrest, LoBiondo, Sestak, Pitts

Voting no: None

Not voting: None

SCHOOL-BUS FUEL COSTS: voting 199 for and 221 against, the House on June 26 defeated a Republican bid to expand HR 6052 (above) to include subsidies for the fuel costs of school buses. The motion stipulated that funding priority in the bill would go to districts curtailing bus services because of high fuel costs.

Greg Walden, R-Ore., said the bill "does absolutely nothing to lower the price of gasoline or diesel and nothing to help our schools pay for the bus-transportation costs they're incurring."

James Oberstar, D-Minn., called the measure "a sham motion" designed to kill the bill. He urged Walden to introduce it during normal committee consideration of transportation funding bills.

A yes vote backed the GOP motion.

Voting yes: Castle, LoBiondo, Pitts

Voting no: Sestak

Not voting: Gilchrest

OIL-MARKET SPECULATION: Voting 402 for and 19 against, the House on June 26 sent the Senate a bill (HR 6377) directing the Commodity Futures Trading Commission to root out "excessive speculation" in the oil-futures market. The bill did not define that term. The agency has authority under existing law to determine whether market prices for commodities accurately reflect supply and demand.

Edward Markey, D-Mass., said the commission "has historically been a reluctant regulator. Instead of a commodities markets watchdog, it has been an industry lapdog, unwilling to use the full authorities that it does have to crack down on excessive speculation."

No member spoke against the bill.

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Castle, Gilchrest, LoBiondo, Sestak, Pitts

Voting no: None

Not voting: None

SENATE

HOUSING-RECOVERY PACKAGE: Voting 83 for and nine against, the Senate on June 24 agreed to debate a housing-recovery package (HR 3221) that would enable lenders to refinance hundreds of thousands of at-risk mortgages in return for government backing of the new loans. The bill also would grant refundable tax credits of \$8,000 to first-time buyers of unoccupied homes; allow taxpayers who do not itemize deductions to treat up to \$700 of their 2008 property taxes as a federal tax deduction and provide at least \$4 billion in grants to help communities and non-profit groups buy foreclosed homes for sale or rental to families below the region's median-income level.

The bill also would authorize local housing authorities to issue billions in tax-exempt bonds to be used to refinance subprime loans and provide low-income rental housing; authorize \$150 million for communities' hiring of credit counselors; create the Federal Housing Finance Agency to oversee the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) and Federal Home Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac) and establish an Affordable Housing Fund financed by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac - to help individuals and families buy and retain homes.

Presidential candidates Barack Obama, D-Ill., and John McCain, R-Ariz., did not vote.

Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., said: "We have 8,400 people every day filing for foreclosure. We need to stabilize this cascading housing problem. When you have home values falling by the hour and you have problems with the lack of new starts, unemployment rates occurring, with it spreading to student loans and commercial lending, this problem has at its center the housing crisis."

James Inhofe, R-Okla., called it "bad policy to put taxpayers on the hook for borrowers who took on more than they could

afford and lenders who made bad loans to begin with. It is entirely unacceptable to have the government put taxpayers on the hook for someone who qualified for a loan more than two or three times what the average American can afford."

A yes vote was to debate the bill.

Voting yes: Carper, Biden, Cardin, Mikulski, Menendez, Lautenberg, Specter, Casey Jr.

Voting no: None

Not voting: None

WAR FUNDING, GI BILL: Voting 92 for and six against, the Senate on June 26 passed a bill (HR 2642) that would appropriate \$162.5 billion to pay Iraq-Afghanistan war costs well into 2009. The bill also would establish a new GI Bill, which would pay four years' college tuition for veterans with at least three years' duty who enlisted after 9/11. The bill also would fund 13 more weeks of jobless checks for the long-term unemployed, along with programs such as flood relief in the Midwest, levee rebuilding in New Orleans, global food aid and Census Bureau upgrades. The overall \$257.5 billion cost would be added to the national debt.

Barack Obama, D-Ill., voted yes and John McCain, R-Ariz., did not vote.

Carl Levin, D-Mich., said: "Extending unemployment insurance during tough times is one of the most effective ways to stimulate the economy one of the fastest ways to infuse money into our economy in the short term."

Tom Coburn, R-Okla., objected to the bill's \$210 million for the Census Bureau, saying problems there "have been obvious to auditors and to Congress for years, and the funding is nothing more than a taxpayer-subsidized bailout for a mismanaged and incompetent agency."

A yes vote was to pass the bill.

Voting yes: Carper, Biden, Cardin, Mikulski, Menendez, Lautenberg, Specter, Casey Jr.

Voting no: None

Not voting: None

MEDICARE DOCTOR PAYMENTS: Voting 58 for and 40 against, the Senate on June 26 failed to reach 60 votes needed to end GOP blockage of a House-passed bill (HR 6331) that would avert the administration's 10.6 percent cut in Medicare payments set for July 1.

Barack Obama, D-Ill., voted yes and John McCain, R-Ariz., did not vote.

Richard Durbin, D-Ill., said many Republican senators "haven't gotten over the debate in the 1960s" that created Medicare. "They still think Medicare is socialism. They still think this is too much government. They want to privatize this. They believe we could rest easy every night if we were in the loving arms of a health insurance company."

Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., said the bill makes "radical changes in Medicare. It doesn't just reimburse physicians; it increases Medicare spending by \$17 billion over 10 years. It makes larger cuts to Medicare Advantage, the highly successful insurance program for America's seniors. This will minimize patient choice in both rural and urban areas."

A yes vote was to advance the bill.

Voting yes: Carper, Biden, Cardin, Mikulski, Menendez, Lautenberg, Casey Jr.

Voting no: Specter

Not voting: None

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