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House of Representatives

The House met at 10:30 a.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. PETRI).

DESIGNATION OF THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
September 28, 1998.

I hereby designate the Honorable THOMAS E. PETRI to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

NEWT GINGRICH,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 21, 1997, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to not to exceed 30 minutes, and each Member except the majority leader, the minority leader or the minority whip limited to not to exceed 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) for 5 minutes.

LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, 10 days ago our community in Portland, Oregon celebrated an opening of a new light rail line, but what brought together the Vice President of the United States, numerous administration officials and over a quarter million Oregonians was not just an engineering achievement but it was, indeed, to celebrate another chapter in Oregon's success story of livable communities.

It showed the power of careful investments in transportation and land use planning. For less than the cost of an additional freeway lane, which would have been very hard to build even if we had the extra money, we have been able to move over 25,000 people per day on the new line and, indeed, have the potential to double that capacity for the relatively modest additional investment of buying more rail cars.

The investment has also sparked 6,000 new housing units that have been built, that are under construction or through the permit process along the light rail line and, indeed, has strengthened our downtowns, not just in the city of Portland but smaller communities along the line.

This billion dollar investment in light rail by integrating engineering and artists into the planning process also provided fascinating public art which will enrich the community for decades to come. Vice President GORE clearly articulated the administration's commitment to protect our environment, avoiding sprawl, and giving more choices to families.

That is an important part of why I am in Congress, so that we can deal with what America's families really care about, making sure that children are safe when they go out the door to school in the morning, that the families are economically secure and healthy, physically and environmentally.

It is not too late for this Congress to address ways to promote more livable communities. We can begin by implementing the transit pass rule change that has been finally approved by the House so that we do not just give free parking to our employees, encouraging them to clog our already congested highways and pollute the air, but maybe an incentive to use the $10 billion transportation system that the Federal Government has helped invest in. The Federal Government can also lead by example, by having higher standards of building design. Maybe even the House will approve my legislation with an amendment in the Treasury, Postal bill that would require the post office to not build in floodplains, that it would not violate local regional transportation plans, and to work with citizens in the downtowns of our cities, large and small.

Perhaps the national park system could be a laboratory in Yellowstone or Yosemite for how to plan the transportation and land use. Or I would hope that perhaps the Federal Government could address the foolish use of taxpayer dollars like the $114,000 home in metropolitan Houston that we have already spent over $800,000 repairing flood damage over the last 20 years.

Every year we make huge expenditures for economic development, crime and education, which are in fact merely spending to fight the symptoms of dysfunctional communities. Last week in Portland we celebrated smart growth of a livable community. My hope is that we in Congress will do everything in our power to give every American community those tools.

TAX CUTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WELLER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. WELLER. Mr. Speaker, we have two weeks left on this legislative calendar this year. I just wanted to report that I am glad to see that we are focusing on doing the people's business.

This last Friday and Saturday the taxpayers of Illinois, the south suburbs, south side of Chicago that I have the privilege of representing, celebrated a great victory when this House adopted the 90–10 plan, a plan that is a twofer, a big win for the folks who pay the bills back home in Illinois.

I am proud that we set aside $1.4 trillion in extra tax revenue, money that

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is part of the surplus that resulted from the first balanced budget in 28 years, that we are setting aside $1.4 trillion to save Social Security.

I am also proud that in the 90–10 plan that we eliminate the marriage tax penalty for the majority of those who suffer it. In fact, 28 million married working couples will benefit. When you think about it, $1.4 trillion is twice what the President asked for last January when we all stood up and applauded the President in his great speech talking about saving Social Security first. There was $600 billion available in surplus tax revenue at that time. We have given the American people more than twice what the President asked for, $1.4 trillion, and we also eliminate the marriage tax penalty for the majority of those who suffer it.

I have often asked over the past year, is it right, is it fair that 28 million married working couples pay higher taxes under our current tax code just because they are married? Is it right, is it fair that a working couple that is married pays higher taxes than an identical couple with identical income that lives together outside of marriage? No, that is wrong.

Last Friday and Saturday, not only did we begin an effort to save Social Security, but we eliminated the marriage tax penalty for the majority of those who suffer it.

Just to give an idea of how this will impact the people of the south suburbs of Illinois, we will take a couple in Joliet, a machinist and a school teacher. They have a combined adjusted gross income of $50,000. They are middle class. Under our current tax code, after you subtract personal exemptions, use the current standard deduction for those who file jointly of $6,900, of course they pay about $5,700 in taxes.

But under the 90–10 plan we double the standard deduction for married working couples to twice what a single person obtains by raising it to $8,500. This machinist and this school teacher in Joliet, Illinois will see an extra $240 in higher take-home pay. We eliminate the marriage penalty for the majority of those who suffer it. And not only is this a big victory for married working couples, but I also want to point out, as a result of doubling the standard deduction, that we simplify the tax code for 6 million married working couples, 6 million married working couples who will no longer have to itemize. They will no longer need to use the schedule A. They will only need to use the 1040–EZ.

That is a big victory, when you can help bring fairness to the tax code as well as simplify the tax code. And those who voted against it, of course it is a political season, will say just about anything. We are just a few short weeks from election. They were somehow claiming that our efforts to eliminate the marriage tax penalty and to help 28 million married working couples, that somehow hurts the Social Security Trust Fund. Wait a second. We just set aside $1.4 trillion for Social Security in surplus tax revenue.

So we asked in the Committee on Ways and Means, which I am proud to be a member of, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. ARCHER) asked the representative, the Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, Judith Chesser, the chairman said, ''As a result of the tax bill,'' which I pointed out eliminates the marriage tax penalty for the majority of those who suffer it, ''being considered by the Committee on Ways and Means, will there be any impact on the monies in the Social Security Trust Fund?''

Judith Chesser, Deputy Commissioner, Social Security Administration, had a very simple answer, something unusual for somebody who represents a bureaucracy. Usually they talk a lot. Her answer was simple: No, the tax cut has absolutely no impact on the Social Security trust fund.

So we had a big victory, working on our effort to save Social Security and, of course, to eliminate the marriage tax penalty for the majority of those who suffer it.

If we look back over the last several years, I am one of those who came to Washington to change how Washington works. That is why I am so proud that we balanced the budget, first time in 28 years, and cut taxes for the middle class for the first time in 16 years.

In 1996 this House made a commitment, and it became law, to help loving families who would like to provide a home for a child in need of adoption, an adoption tax credit. That is now law, a key part of the Contract with America.

In 1997 another key part of the Contract with America became law as well. That is a $500 per child tax credit which will benefit 3 million Illinois children, $1.5 billion in higher take-home pay that will stay home in Illinois rather than going to Washington.

We had a big victory this past weekend. We have a great opportunity as we focus on doing the people's business. Let us save Social Security. Let us eliminate the marriage tax penalty. I hope that the Senate will give the same level of bipartisan support on saving Social Security, eliminating the marriage tax penalty that we gave it in the House.

MANAGED CARE FLIGHT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. CAPPS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mrs. CAPPS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to bring to the attention of the House a crisis that is looming throughout the country and is happening right now in my district, the central coast of California.

In the past several weeks, many of the managed care companies, primarily in San Luis Obispo County, have announced that they will no longer be offering seniors the option of Medicare HMOs. This pullout could begin as early as January.

Mr. Speaker, these actions are causing tremendous turmoil in my district. Thousands of senior citizens will face extreme hardship, including large increases in out-of-pocket expenses, confusion over benefits and other transition complications. It is estimated that over 50,000 seniors will lose access to Medicare HMOs in San Luis Obispo County and perhaps thousands more in Santa Barbara County. By early next year, only one HMO option may be available for seniors in San Luis Obispo.

Why is this happening? There seem to be two reasons. First and most critically, reimbursement rates for HMOs in my district have historically been among the lowest in California and the country. To be precise, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties are the third and fourth lowest in the State. In both counties, HMOs receive less than $400 per beneficiary per month. However, just next door in Ventura County to the south, managed care companies receive more than $500. And in Los Angeles County, a few miles away, the reimbursement rate is almost $650.

While the reimbursement rates are low in my district, the cost of living is anything but. Anyone who has visited the central coast of California knows that housing prices are high, rents are high, and health care costs reflect that reality. We have excellent health care, but it is not cheap.

The second reason for the HMO pullout are the recent rulings by the Health Care Financing Administration which may be exacerbating an already bad situation in my district and across the country, especially in rural and underserved areas. New administrative burdens, higher-than-expected health care inflation, and smaller annual reimbursement increases may be adding to the reasons managed care companies across the country are withdrawing Medicare products from the market.

To address this crisis, I have recently written to the chairman of the Subcommittee on Health. I know that this subcommittee is looking into the nationwide flight of managed care companies from Medicare products. I want the Chair to hear firsthand how this is occurring in my district and to urge the adoption of bipartisan legislation to address this issue.

The bipartisan Medicare Health Plan Fair Payment Act, of which I am proud to be a cosponsor, will address the chronic underpayment of health plans in rural areas.

Low reimbursement rates discourage companies from offering their products in rural areas. That means fewer health care options for seniors and sometimes no options at all. We need to make sure we are paying these companies enough to get them to offer products our seniors clearly want. That is the first step.