

Cooperative is an excellent example of a cooperative that is facing a serious at-risk financial situation. The North American Bison Cooperative is an example of how the community cooperative spirit is alive and well, but the complex, intricacies of successfully marketing the cooperative's product have not been met.

Five years ago the bison cooperative got off to a terrific start. Every year, it has grown every year by selling a substantial amount of bison in Europe. But, that growth has brought new challenges. To meet the growing demand for the steaks and roasts, more bison had to be slaughtered. It was real easy to market all of the meat when you only slaughtered a thousand head a year, but it's very different issue when you've increased your production to more than 8,000 animals.

While this cooperative has had excellent markets for every bison steak and roast, it has extreme difficulty in marketing the other half of the animal that is ground up into burgers. Those trim products built up in the freezer while new products and markets were developed. Yes, the cooperative has developed several products—sausages, jerky, and ravioli—and those products are in a whole lot of stores throughout the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Montana. But that has not been enough. The cooperative has developed a strategic marketing relationship with a private firm in Denver, Colorado. This firm also developed new value-added bison products.

But every new product takes time to develop. Therefore, USDA has had to get involved the past two years to assist in the purchase of bison trim to move the Bison Cooperative's product. Clearly, USDA has recognized that this cooperative needs a financial shove and is willing to ante up to allow the Bison Cooperative to survive in its infant phase.

C. NORTH DAKOTA—MORE THAN JUST AG COOPERATIVES

Even though, North Dakota is a predominantly rural state, it has more than just agriculture cooperatives. North Dakota because of its rural communities has electric, credit unions, housing, and telephone cooperatives to name a few.

III. COOPERATIVES AND THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

A. BACKGROUND ON GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

Clearly, the government at all levels has a role in cooperative development and maintenance. Cooperatives serve different functions than corporations or small businesses. They have different tax statuses, different contracts, and most importantly, have non-profit philosophies.

As a federal lawmaker, I believe my role in cooperative development and maintenance is essential—especially in regard to agriculture cooperatives.

As you may know, the 1996 Farm Bill changed the course of agriculture policy in the U.S. for the first time in sixty years (since the New Deal). No longer does the government provide a safety net for producers who have suffered from low prices and severe weather. Instead, the new farm bill leaves it up to the producer, through his own instincts, to market the product he produces. In my opinion, the farm bill has made the occupation of farming similar to rolling dice.

B. COOPERATIVE COMPONENTS OF THE 1996 FARM BILL

The 1996 Farm Bill did include provisions to promote value-added agriculture. It created

the Rural Business Cooperative office of the USDA Rural Development Agency. The Rural Business Cooperative's mission is very simple: to enhance the quality of life for all Americans by providing leadership in building competitive businesses and cooperatives that can prosper in the global marketplace.

The Rural Business Cooperative has many methods of providing credit for cooperatives to get started. The Business and Industry (B&I) Guarantee Loan Program helps create jobs and stimulates rural economies by providing financial backing for rural businesses. This program guarantees up to 80 percent of a loan made by a commercial lender. Loan proceeds may be used for working capital, machinery and equipment, buildings and real estate, and certain types of debt refinancing.

The B&I Direct Loan Program provides loans to public entities and private parties who cannot obtain credit from other sources. This type of assistance is available in rural areas.

The 1996 Farm Bill, in my opinion, needs to be reexamined because of its lack of a safety net, but I am a strong support of the efforts for value-added cooperatives.

C. COOPERATIVES AND THE 106TH CONGRESS

It is important to me that Congress maintain its commitment to cooperative development by continuing funding for the Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program within the USDA's Rural Development.

The dollars committed to this program have generated hundreds if not thousands of jobs and brought many producers back from the brink of economic disaster.

It is very clear to me just how important this under funded and little recognized program has been to many of the organizations who have come together as part of the National Network of Centers for Rural Cooperative Development.

IV. COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

A. ABOUT COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

The development of rural businesses today is just as vital as it was 50 or 75 years ago.

As mentioned before, the smaller business owner, farmer, and rancher will continue to be squeezed out of the marketplace by giant corporate conglomerates that are vertically integrated, beholden to Wall Street and its stockholders.

Cooperatives represent the best hope that most rural communities, rural residents, rural business owners, and farmers have for ever hoping to control their destiny.

Cooperatives require commitment and hard work, and I know that they are not always going to succeed.

Of the eight Centers represented in the national network, I was proud to learn that at least half are involved in establishing value-added agricultural cooperatives.

I'm particularly proud of my fellow North Dakotan—Bill Patrie. Bill has established a phenomenal number of value-added cooperatives in our state, and most have been very successful. But, Bill also knows the pain of witnessing a great idea not succeed.

B. MORE PEOPLE WHO ARE COOPERATIVE LEADERS

Andy Ferguson in the Northeast who is breaking new ground to establish energy cooperatives; Rosemary Mahoney and E.G. Nadeau who are building value-added markets for organic products in the Upper Midwest; Gus Townes who is developing new value-added vegetable cooperatives and credit

unions in the Southeast; Melbah Smith who is building partnerships with state agencies, universities, and private businesses to help small Mississippi sweet potato growers build a multi-million dollar cooperative enterprise; Annette Pagan who is working with poultry producers and small wood manufacturers in Arkansas; and Mahlon Lang and Karen Spatz who continue to work with members of the Hmong in building a cooperative that strengthens their community.

V. CONCLUSION

A. COOPERATIVES AS WE HEAD INTO A NEW MILLENNIUM

There are many challenges facing cooperatives as we head into the 21st Century. Cooperatives will be faced with the struggling challenges of increased competition through market concentration, internal forces urging the cooperative to get bigger, and continuing to meet the producer-owners' interests. And, at the same time, meeting the very diverse needs of American consumers.

Mr. Speaker, October is "National Co-op Month" and it is an excellent opportunity for the American consumer to recognize the importance of cooperatives in "the American way of life."

OUR SCHOOLS ARE TOO BIG AND TOO IMPERSONAL

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. HILL) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. HILL of Indiana. Mr. Speaker, last April, shortly after the terrible tragedy that occurred at Columbine High School in Colorado, I spoke with my freshman colleague from the State of Washington (Mr. BAIRD). My colleague from Washington is a trained psychologist, so I asked him for his thoughts about the Columbine tragedy. Since Mr. BAIRD is a trained psychologist, I was expecting a long academic explanation using lots of psychological terms regular people do not understand. Instead, he had a simple solution, an explanation. He looked at me and said, "Baron, our schools are too big, and these kids do not know one another."

The Columbine tragedy and other recent events of violence in our schools have made all of us take a serious look at our children, our schools, and ourselves. These recent tragedies have forced us to think about how we educate our children and how we can make our schools safer and better.

This is a personal issue for me, for my wife, Betty, is a middle school teacher; and my youngest daughter is in the eighth grade at a public school in my hometown of Seymour, Indiana. I do not believe that there is one easy solution to all of the problems our schools and our children face today, nor do I believe that we politicians in Congress could pass some law that would solve every school's and every child's problem. I strongly believe that the people who work with children every day, the parents, the teachers and local school administrators, are in the best position to make decisions about their schools.

But this week I am introducing a bill that I hope will make some small contribution to addressing a problem that I and other people have been talking about for many years. It is a problem that the recent episodes of school violence in Colorado and Georgia and other places around the country have once again brought to the forefront of our national debate. It is the problem that my colleague Dr. BAIRD was talking about.

Our schools are too big and too impersonal. Too many of our children wake up every day and go to schools that make them feel disconnected and detached from their teachers, their parents and their communities. The goal of my bill that I am introducing, the Smaller Schools Stronger Communities Act, is to make our schools smaller and to help parents, teachers and administrators and students strengthen the sense of community that many of our schools today are lacking.

My strong feelings about this issue come from my own experience growing up in southern Indiana. When I was growing up in Jackson County, there were more high schools than there are today in towns like Tampico and Clear Spring and Cortland. There were high schools that local kids attended and local families supported. These communities were proud of their schools. Their schools brought people together and helped keep their towns strong and vital places to live.

These schools were the hearts of the communities, and when we consolidated, when school consolidation forced their high schools to close, it tore the heart out of these communities. These high schools along with thousands of other smaller schools around America were closed because for many years educators have followed the rule that bigger schools are better. For a long time we all assumed that bigger schools were better because they could offer students more courses, more extracurricular activities, and could save school districts money.

The statistics on school size show how dramatically this bigger-is-better approach has changed the way we educate our children. In 1930 there were 262,000 elementary, middle and high schools in America. Today there are only 88,000 schools. In 1930 the average school had 100 students. Today's average school has 500 students.

Some education experts are now arguing that school consolidation has gone too far. More and more educators today believe that our children do better academically and socially in smaller schools that are closer to their homes and their parents than in the big schools with thousands of students. Because many schools have become too big, they sometimes harm the students they are supposed to be helping. Many students in big schools never develop any meaningful relationships with their teachers and never experienced a sense of belonging in their schools.

When I start looking at the issue of big schools, I was surprised to find that some of the biggest critics of big schools are high school principals. The men and women who run our high schools, who work with our teenagers every day, say that schools are too big and too impersonal. In 1966 the national association of secondary school principals released a report criticizing the bigness of today's high schools. The principals recommended that the high school of the 21st century be much more student centered and personalized.

Here is what the high school principals said: students take more interest in school when they experience a sense of belonging. Some students cope in large impersonal high schools because they have the advantage of external motivation that allows them to transcend the disadvantage of school size. Many others, however, would benefit from a more intimate setting in which their presence could be more readily and repeatedly acknowledged. Experts have found that achievement levels in smaller schools are higher especially among children from disadvantaged backgrounds who need extra help to succeed.

A recent study of academic achievement and school size concluded that high schools and smaller schools perform better in course subjects of reading, math, history, and science. Students in smaller schools also have better attendance records, are less likely to get in fights or join gangs. A principal of a successful small high school recently wrote that small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot, the safety and security of being where you are well known by the people who care for you the most.

The bill that I am introducing, the Smaller School Strong Stronger Communities Act provides grants to school districts that want to develop school size reduction strategy. This bill does not introduce a new mandate or try to micromanage local education authority. It simply supports education leaders in school districts who decide they want to implement a plan to reduce the size of their school units either through new building space or through schools within schools.

I hope this bill will encourage local school districts to take a look at this idea and perhaps think about ways they can make their schools smaller and to find ways to help students feel connected again to their schools and their communities and their parents. This bill and the academic research I have been discussing here today make a very simple point about our schools, our kids, and ourselves. Our lives are better when we feel connected to the people we live and work with.

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HEALTH CARE REFORM

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. WELDON of Florida). Under the Speak-

er's announced policy of January 6, 1999, the gentleman from Missouri (Mr. TALENT) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. TALENT. Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about health care tonight, and I am going to get into some legislative language. I think it is important that we do that, because we are going to be voting tomorrow and the next day on pieces of legislation that will have as big an impact on the quality of life of the American people as anything that will be voted on this session. And I think sometimes it is important that before we vote on bills, we actually read them and take a look at what they say. I hope that comes clear in the course of my discussion this evening.

Before I get into what may sound to some people, however, like a bit of a law school discourse or exercise, I want to talk about the real impact these bills are going to have on real people.

There is nothing more important to the average American and his or her family than the quality of the health insurance that they have access to.

We need health care reform in this country, and we have to keep in mind that it has two aspects. First and foremost, we have to help people who do not have access to good quality private health insurance get access to that health insurance.

Then the second thing we have to do is ensure once they have access to that insurance, it delivers for them. When they get sick, they get the care their physician says that they need, when they need it, before they become seriously ill or before they die. But it is very important that we make certain that in providing for health care reform and providing for accountability of managed care plans, we do not increase the number of people who do not have health insurance in the first place.

Health care reform of insurance is of no value to you if you do not have the insurance, and too many people in America today do not have health care insurance. Forty-four million people in the United States do not have health insurance. One out of every six Americans is without health insurance. They face the risk of illness, they and their families, without having health insurance.

There is nothing more tragic than talking to individuals in this situation. Maybe they have been downsized by a company, they are working for a small employer who does not provide health insurance, they cannot afford it. Maybe they are 55, 60 years old, retired, but they are not old enough for Medicare. Maybe they have a history of illness and they do not work for a large employer and they cannot buy health insurance on the individual market.

These are our friends and neighbors, and we need to help them. Eleven million of them are children, and 75 percent of the people who are uninsured work for small businesses or own small