

industry, and away from the government, to ensure adequate funding of the system.

Better financing means enhanced returns to provide for an improved benefit structure for Railroad Retirement beneficiaries.

These benefits would include a lowering of the incredibly high payroll taxes currently paid by railroad workers and employers; a lowering of the retirement age for those with 30 years of service to age 60; reducing the vesting period in the system from 10 years to 5; and improving the benefits paid to widows and widowers.

All of these improved benefits are desirable reforms, and they can be achieved without compromising the solvency of the system, which the Railroad Retirement Board's actuary has projected out to 75 years under this legislation.

Because this legislation is the right solution at the right time, it has received overwhelming bipartisan support in both Houses of Congress.

Last year, when the bill was first introduced, it was approved on the floor of the House by a vote of 391-25, and had the support of 80 Members in the Senate. However, after it was reported favorably by the Finance Committee, it never made it to the Senate floor.

After its reintroduction in the current Congress, the bill has again been approved by a landslide on the floor of the House, and now awaits action here in the Senate, where it has enjoyed the support of 74 cosponsors.

I urge your continued support of this legislation, and speedy passage of the reform that railroad workers and their families throughout this country so badly deserve.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. JOHNSON). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak in morning business for 10 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is recognized for 10 minutes.

THE SENATE AGENDA

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, we are hopefully working down to the end of this session. We have completed most of those things that we need to do. We need now to focus on those remaining items that I think are imperative for us to complete. Obviously, there are lots of things that could be done. The fact is, we have spent an extraordinary amount of money. We are going to exceed our budget with the budget activities and, of course, about \$50 billion in addition to that. I agree that it should indeed be spent for those things. We

are in an emergency situation with the terrorists. We are in an emergency situation with the economy.

The two things I believe we have to do are, No. 1, finish our appropriations. We are moving along. The House passed one of the most difficult bills yesterday. We will now undertake to do Defense appropriations. There are about four more with which we need to deal.

Then we need to finish a stimulus package. The President has called upon the Senate to pass a responsible economic stimulus bill.

It is difficult to identify what will have a short-term impact on the economy. Our economy is much lower than we would like. Indeed, as has been said, we are in a recession. But we need to do something that will have some impact.

The President has suggested a package that would extend unemployment benefits for 13 weeks for Americans who lost their jobs as a result of the terrorist attacks; making \$11 billion available to low-income people to obtain health insurance in a manner such that the system would not become mandatory in the future; \$3 billion in special energy emergency grants to help displaced workers. That has to do with health care coverage.

Then, of course, the other portion has to do with helping create jobs, which, after all, is really the result we would like. We would like to help people without jobs. Most importantly, we provide encouragement to companies and corporations by accelerating depreciation so they will invest in new material; partial expensing to encourage the purchasing of new equipment; and also have payments for low-income workers and get the money in their hands so we can see increased purchasing.

Those are things on which I hope we focus. I know we are talking about agriculture. We are talking about railroad retirement. They need to be completed. But there is a question of whether they need to be completed now with this emergency. We really need to evaluate the money. We have already made available \$12 billion in new spending for many of the things we talked about. The President and the administration determine where it will go.

I am hopeful that we can focus in the relatively short time we have left. I am pleased that we seem to be making progress in terms of the economic stimulus. The bill that came out of the committee was not a bipartisan bill. We did not work on it from both sides. Now we have a House bill that is somewhat different. We have a Democratic bill that is somewhat different. The President's bill is somewhat different. Of course, we need to find a reasonable agreement among those groups to come up with something that works. I certainly encourage that we do that.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Carolina is recognized.

Mr. HELMS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that it be in order for me to make my remarks while seated at my desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. HELMS. I thank the Chair.

THE NORTH SHORE ROAD MUST BE COMPLETED

Mr. HELMS. Mr. President, for some time I have felt inclined to discuss in the Senate a matter for the RECORD and of importance to the people living in the far western counties of North Carolina and in the beautiful mountains adjacent to the Tennessee border.

The matter involved is the federal government's finally fulfilling after a fashion a commitment made in 1943 in writing by the U.S. Government to the citizens of Swain County. The federal government proposed to build a road along the north shore of Fontana Lake which was created in World War II to provide power to the TVA. This written commitment was made to citizens who voluntarily gave up their homes to support the U.S.'s World War II defense efforts.

The federal government has not yet fulfilled its commitment, and that has caused a great deal of resentment and mistrust of the government among the citizens of Swain County and other surrounding counties on the North Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

These citizens understandably believe that the federal government should now live up to its written commitment made during World War II because these people gave up their homes in order that Fontana Lake could be built so that power could be generated by TVA.

But, there has been a curious development. A small group of citizens in Swain County now proposes to ask that the federal government buy them out, thereby voiding that federal government commitment made in 1943. They presented the proposal that they be bought out to the Swain County Commissioners, and, praise the Lord, the commissioners rejected this suggestion.

So as a result of the \$16 million appropriation in the fiscal year 2001 Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, this project has at long last begun to move. The National Park Service and the Federal Highway Administration have restarted this process to complete that road as promised, in writing, in 1943 to the citizens of Swain County and western North Carolina.

Mr. President, I have a letter in hand, along with the text of the resolution adopted by the Swain County Commissioners which expresses their thanks for the \$16 million that provided for continued road construction and improvements that were included in the fiscal year 2001 Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill.