

Sweeney from the Statehouse 6/4/2010

Greetings House District 44!

Farmer's Market Coupon Applications Available for Older Iowans

On Monday May 24, 2010, the Iowa Department on Aging (IDA) Director John McCalley and Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey announced that Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition applications are now available for low-income older Iowans. The program provides low-income seniors with 10 checks for \$3 each that can be redeemed for fresh, locally grown produce at authorized farmers markets and farm stands from June 1 through October 31, 2010.

Iowa Agriculture Secretary Northey noted-- "Iowa's farmers markets and farm stands are a great source of healthy and nutritious foods, and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program gives Iowa seniors greater access to these local food choices. A combination of state and federal funds will be used to make benefits available to more than 20,000 eligible seniors this year. Eligible seniors must be sixty years of age or older with a household income level at or below \$20,036 if single or \$26,955 for a married couple. Iowa seniors will be asked to complete a one page application verifying their eligibility, by providing their birth date and the last four digits of their social security number. Checks will be issued once per season on a first come first served basis. The thirteen (13) Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) will begin to distribute checks and nutritional education information starting in June.

To find an Area Agency on Aging near you, contact the Iowa Association of Area Agencies on Aging (i4a) toll free at 866-468-7887 or at www.i4a.org. The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program is administered through the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. For more information contact Margaret Long, Program Administrator, at 515-242-6239 or margaret.long@iowaagriculture.gov. For more information on the Iowa Department on Aging (IDA), visit <http://www.aging.iowa.gov/>. To locate resources for older adults and people with disabilities, visit www.lifelonglinks.org. More information on the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship can be found at www.iowaagriculture.gov/

Jobs Watch Update: Still No Progress

Twelve months and \$830 million in borrowing, the Iowa economy continues to struggle. Despite the promises that the signature legislative initiative – "IJOBS" – would create tens of thousands of jobs, the unemployment rate continues to creep upward.

Every month, the Iowa Department of Workforce Development (IWD) updates the state's employment statistics. Accordingly, on May 21, 2010, IWD announced that 2,600 more jobs were lost in April. Statewide, 116,800 Iowans or 6.9% of the population are looking for work. Over the course of a year, 24,500 people have lost their job, unemployment in April 2009 was 5.5%, nearly a percent and a half better than today.

In related news, the national unemployment rate is up as well. The U.S. unemployment rate increased a full percentage point from last year. Today, 9.9% of Americans are without work, compared to 8.9% in April 2009.

Despite claims to the contrary, no evidence exists that the IJOBS program has created any long term jobs or an economic boost for Iowans. In fact, the state is in worse shape today than it was this time last year.

House Republicans are committed to offering ideas to reform Iowa's regulatory, property and income tax systems to create a pro-growth, job creating environment to finally clean up Iowa's fiscal mess.

Controversy Continues to Surround Race to the Top

In the very first week of session, I expressed my concern for the Race to the Top program. As it furthers, my concerns were verified.

In Iowa and across the county the intrigue continues to swirl around President Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) education reform effort. State applications for round two of the competitive grant are due in June.

RTTT is a controversial \$4 billion federal education competitive grant program that requires states desiring the money to do four things: adopt rigorous standards and assessments, link teacher pay to performance, commit to turning around persistently low performing schools and create transparent data reporting.

RTTT riles everyone from teacher unions to conservatives to school district management. The teacher unions oppose linking pay to performance and firing bad teachers in low performing schools. Conservatives opposed the federal intrusion. School district management opposes teacher unions muscling state legislatures to require protectionist negotiations.

Add to that list governors, like Minnesota's Tim Pawlenty, who said last week that his state won't apply in the second round because the state legislature listened to their teachers union rather than their President.

In Iowa, the seven urban network school districts did an about face and now support Iowa's second round application. These key districts say that they are now players in RTTT after the Iowa Department of Education assured the districts that the new state law requiring union negotiation on how to turn round low performing schools doesn't apply to the big pot of RTTT money.

Iowa DOE officials couldn't explain why the issue wasn't more clear to these key districts or to the legislature during conversations last session. This clarity means that 245 districts representing 73 percent of Iowa's students are on board with Iowa's RTTT application. This is up from the first round application which represented only 43 percent of Iowa's students.

Take note of another Iowa development. Iowa's 35 lowest performing school buildings located in 18 districts are each eligible for between \$50,000 and \$2 million in ARRA money. These funds, according to the Iowa DOE, **are** the ones directly linked to the new state law requiring union agreement on how to turn around the failing schools.

This week 11 of the 18 districts turned down the money. Why? The districts objected to the forced negotiations and the federal money wasn't worth the red tape. The "Thank you, but No" districts include Sioux City, Council Bluffs, Lewis Central, Burlington, Cardinal, Cedar Rapids, Colfax-Mingo, Columbus, Olin, Wapello and West Monona.

Frustration about forced union negotiation lead Columbus School District Superintendant Rich Bridenstine to tell the *Des Moines Register*, "Half of my school employees don't live in the districts. Should they decide what's best for this district, or should it be elected members of this community called the school board?"

The picture isn't any better in Minnesota where last week Governor Pawlenty halted his state's application after the legislature failed to enact reforms that would make Minnesota more RTTT competitive.

Governor Pawlenty asked the legislature to do three things: provide alternative ways to become a teacher, dump a tenure system that makes it hard to fire bad teachers, tie teacher pay to student performance.

The legislature failed to any of three and Pawlenty came out swinging saying his state won't apply for the second round.

"What we saw this session should be an embarrassment to the DFL controlled legislature – they continued to put the interest of union members ahead of the interest of school children," Pawlenty told the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.

Colorado's Governor Bill Ritter saw the same opposition but got a different result. Ritter went up against his state teachers union and got a new evaluation system that bases 50 percent of a teacher's and principal's evaluation on academic growth. The new law also redefines how schools address probationary teachers.

The Colorado governor attributes his success to the fact that he is a lame duck. "I wasn't running for re-election and I was free of election year politics," Ritter said earlier this month after the Colorado legislature adjourned.

Single county areas that don't have to merge may in fact merge. Second, the process appears to disregard legislative intent.

Best Spring Fishing Spots

Even though I'm not an avid angler, here is some interesting information for my fisherman friends.

On Tuesday, May 18, 2010, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) issued a news release touting that one of Iowa's best kept secrets is the excellent fishing that takes place here each spring. Now, the secret of where to fish this time of year is easier to access in a new interactive map created by the Iowa DNR. The map features 50 top fishing spots, identified by DNR fisheries experts. By clicking on a point on the map, web visitors can find details on where to fish, types of fish to be caught, and tips to be successful. The map, created using Google™, can be found at <http://www.iowadnr.gov/fish/map.html>