

Huffman addresses district issues

By Staff reports

Thursday, August 18, 2016



Congressman Jared Huffman visited the Mendocino Coast last week to do a little camping with his family and meet with constituents. He stopped by the newspaper office for an hour's question-and-answer session that covered a range of subjects.

Broadband

Congressman Huffman is currently working on passing a bill he introduced called the Rural Broadband Infrastructure Investment Act, which promotes new opportunities for broadband deployment on California's North Coast. Contents of the bill include making North Coast communities eligible for \$670 million in federal

broadband financing; permitting the Rural Utility Service to offer, in addition to loans and loan guarantees, broadband grants; and increasing the overall RUS broadband investment from \$25 million to \$50 million annually.

Huffman's bill builds on the Rural Electrification Act, which brought power and telephone service to rural communities across America during the New Deal.

"I think it is a good idea to build on the program that brought us rural electrification and give it some modern application to help fulfill this critical need of rural broadband. I haven't had a hearing, and I haven't been able to get a vote on this bill ... I have a bill that would cost money, and anything that will cost money in this Congress sort of goes on a separate track. But I think it is a great idea and I am going to keep pushing it," said Huffman.

If Hillary Clinton is elected president, she intends to push for infrastructure reform as part of her first hundred days and Huffman says he will do everything he can to make sure this will also include broadband for rural communities.

Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act

In July of this year, Congress voted to pass the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act, which intends to improve mental health care by enhancing crisis response services, promoting early intervention and integration of mental health, substance use and primary care, improving grants and removing federal barriers to care.

"It is helpful in the sense that it authorizes a whole bunch of things, but like so many things that this Congress has done, it is a shell. It doesn't have funding, and in that sense it is very inadequate. Yes it is helpful to

clarify things around privacy, and reauthorize some pilot projects that could be very effective if they had money, but we didn't provide the money," said Huffman.

Hospital

Mendocino Coast District Hospital, like rural hospitals across the country, is challenged with keeping its finances in the black while maintaining the range of services it offers to the community. Currently proposed federal and state legislation approaches the problem from various angles, from adjusting reimbursements for care to enabling hospitals to better recruit and keep physicians and other healthcare workers. Huffman was guardedly optimistic about progress in the near future.

"That kind of gets back to the ... fact that Congress needs to do more than pass empty shells. We need to pass legislation with dollars behind it so we can actually help people. I think there is hope. We've got to get into a little bit better political climate for that to happen. In the remainder of this Congress, I wouldn't expect any great breakthroughs. I think we're constantly revisiting MediCare reimbursement rates and I hope we'll be revisiting the Affordable Care Act itself. Right now, for the last six years, we've been stuck on the Affordable Care Act — the only conversation has been repeal it or keep it exactly as it is. There has to be some point where we have a new conversation about improving it, building on it and going forward. If we can get to that point — and this election will have a huge impact on whether we can — there's a lot we can do.

"We can continue moving away from this fee-for-service model and we can find creative funding formulas that can be sensitive to the economics of rural health care delivery, which are really tough. That's the problem, really. Everywhere in my district where rural communities are being served, whether it's a VA clinic, whether it's a rural hospital, a community clinic, and Indian health services clinic, I run into a lot of the same problems. That is, the costs are higher, they have a heck of a time recruiting and retaining providers. So there are just a number of baked-in challenges to providing healthcare in rural America. I doubt that we'll be able to fix all of that, but we can look through a combination of reimbursement rates and maybe some tools to address that recruitment and retention piece. One of the clinics I represent in Humboldt County is offering a really novel incentive to get physicians up there. They're basically funding housing for grandparents and parents of the physicians. They're finding that some of the physicians — usually they're concerned about whether their spouse can have a job, but a lot of them have aging parents, too. They don't want to be separated. It's pretty creative and things like that may help."

"Eventually it would be nice if we could find a way to break down the silos in healthcare delivery ... It would be great to get more integration ... In Del Norte County, they are simultaneously talking about a new hospital and a new Indian health clinic, within a few miles of each other. They're struggling to raise the funds and to figure it all out."

Fisheries

The catch-and-share quota system for groundfishing is undergoing a five-year review (a public hearing on the program will be held in Fort Bragg Sep. 6). Huffman was generally positive about the new approach to fisheries management, based on quotas rather than yearly regulated catch limits.

"I'm roughly familiar with the catch-share program. I'm assuming that five-year review happens through the PFMC. I think there have been some real successes with the catch-share program. I think it's enabled the fisheries to continue fishing while also managing the resource in a more sustainable way. I think some of the fine area work has been done here in Mendocino County. What I'm focussed on — I don't presume to tell the PFMC how to set their quotas or how to micromanage a fishery. They've got the scientists and the stakeholders around the table and they do a nice job of that. What I try to help on is things like the cost of

fishing and having a boat, the cost of monitors and, in the case of this particular fishery, they've got an old loan that the Department of Commerce gave the maybe ten years ago at a really high interest rate, 8 to 10 percent interest. I passed a bill with a colleague from Washington State, a Republican colleague, that authorizes the refinancing of that loan at today's low interest rates. That's going to help their bottom line and let them keep their boats in the water."

Offshore energy

An offshore wind-energy project off Rhode Island became the first licensed offshore energy generation project in the United States. Huffman said he thought it would be a while before such projects get started on the West Coast.

"I think there's potential and I don't think we should dismiss it out of hand. But I think siting on the California coast is going to be very challenging. California is a leader in clean, renewable energy and that's great. We're also a leader on coastal preservation, and that's great too. So the challenge will be can we reconcile the need for more renewables and potentially offshore renewables with our coastal preservation priority.

I suspect there are going to be locations in California. In fact I was just talking to some clean energy advocate in Humboldt County earlier this week. Probably California is not the place to pioneer this. I know Oregon and Washington are getting some Department of Energy grants and they are doing some pilot projects for offshore wave and wind and I think we should watch what they do very carefully and let them learn and perfect some of this. If it looks like it can be done without impacts to our coastal resources, let's look at appropriate places in California to deploy it."

Homelessness

Huffman said addressing issues of homelessness will take a response from all levels of government and varied resources of local communities besides.

"There are so many aspects to our homelessness challenge. Often in rural areas like Mendocino County, I see too many veterans homeless. There are some tools we have to help veterans that aren't available to the general public. There are housing vouchers that we can get and we do that regularly. We could expand that program and we could do more. It can help them get a roof over their head. That's one thing I'm hearing in the district and throughout the state is that the housing first approach seems to be the consensus these days, that we've got to get a roof over people's heads first. It used to be that we didn't do it that way, we could kind of try to address whatever mental illness, addiction, other problems while they remain homeless — that doesn't work, is what people are telling us now. So, the state has some interesting initiatives — the tiny homes and others. I think that sounds great. I support it. At the federal level, I'll do my best to try to get more funding into HUD, which is under-funded. That's on the discretionary side of the federal budget, so it's on the sequester and it's just inadequate. We need to get more Section 8 landlords in Mendocino County and elsewhere and I need to work with my colleagues and get Section 8 better funded so that it's more attractive to landlords to provide that housing. Those are just a few things that I hope I can do, but it's going to take a lot more than just Congress and federal programs. This is a state issue, it's a county and local issue and it's going to include nonprofits and the faith community, everybody working together because it's getting worse ... My job is to try to send resources and funds at least on those federal pieces of this, to be part of the solution. It does get you back to mental health and addiction treatment, because those are often part of the problem, and there are federal programs and federal dollars that need to do better in being part of the solution."

Trump

Huffman gave his impressions of the reception Donald Trump is getting among his colleagues and with voters in general.

“You’re in a Democratic bubble out here for the most part and what I hear from my Democratic colleagues is basically what you read in most newspapers in communities like ours. People are horrified by Trump and there’s just a high level of disbelief that he’s even made it this far. There’s a growing sense of alarm, not even hyperbolic, I think, about some of the terms that are starting to be used. But there’s a greater chance that I’ll be the starting pitcher for the Giants than the Republican Party pulling its backing from Trump. There technically is a process, I’m told, where that could happen theoretically but it’s not going to happen. The interesting thing is, that there are still a lot of Republicans who support this guy, as offensive and dangerous and reckless as he has been, his support never seems to drop below 40 percent. So within the Republican Party there’s a very significant body of support for Donald Trump and they’ll have to sort that one out and decide what that means for their party, but I don’t think there’s any kind of majority thoughts within the party on dumping him.

Clinton

Huffman was positive about Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign so far.

I’ve been pleased at the way she has matured as a candidate and at the way she seems to have absorbed the priorities of our country right now, including ones that have really been driven by the Bernie Sanders campaign. So I feel good about the way our party came together over the last month, the way the platform came together, the way Hillary’s positions have become bolder and more progressive, and I think it’s framed a lot of the issues going into the fall election in a way that certainly resonates with my politics very well. She’s going into this election very strong on campaign finance reform, on income inequality, on student loan debt and the cost of higher education, climate change, just about everything that I, and I feel like my constituents, would want her to be strong on. Some have been slow to come around because they were very excited about the Bernie Sanders campaign, but whatever animosity we’ve seen with Democrats was nothing compared to what we’ve seen with Republicans. They got down in the mud and then below the mud, and I feel like Democrats preserved a certain amount of dignity and decorum and didn’t degrade the office of the presidency the way these Republicans have. That’s really the most disheartening thing, the way they’ve cheapened the process.

Third party candidates

He was not so enthusiastic about third party presidential campaigns.

“I think it’s a complete waste. Jill Stein is not going to contribute in any positive way to this election, and certainly the only difference that Jill Stein could make is to maybe cost Hillary a very close state like Iowa. I think Bernie Sanders said it best when we were at the convention and we were at the California Delegation Breakfast one morning and some of his supporters were booing him because he’s come around and he’s endorsing Secretary Clinton, he’s campaigning for her. He said, ‘it’s easy to boo, it’s a lot harder to look your grandkids in the eye and tell them you helped elect Donald Trump.’”

