



Boucher foresees progress *Rocky Knob project gets \$1.2 million*

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Things should move forward this year on a proposed development at Rocky Knob on the Blue Ridge Parkway. That was the highlight of an interview Congressman Rick Boucher gave The Floyd Press.

On a visit to Floyd, Boucher, the Ninth District Representative, said Congress has approved \$1.2 million for the planning and development phase of the project. "I'm very optimistic the committee can come up with a recommendation on the development."

Boucher said the committee is comprised of about 50 community representatives from Floyd and Patrick Counties, including local government officials, business owners and members of the travel economy. Boucher said he has asked Governor Mark Warner to seek through the General Assembly an additional state match of 20 to 25 percent.

"The Blue Ridge Music Center, on the Carroll-Grayson line, is now complete," Boucher noted. "It's a very similar project. Now we're waiting for the planning committee to come up with a recommendation for the design, location and function of the project."

Boucher also said there is an urgency to obtain more funding to help heat homes this winter. "Heating costs for most people will increase dramatically, up to 48 percent this year.

"The federal program is at \$2 billion and has not increased in the last three years. It is under funded generally and very significantly this year. I'll ask Congress to increase the amount to \$5 billion."

He said energy costs were impacted by hurricane damage to Gulf Coast facilities and resultant shortages, and those costs should moderate by next winter as damaged facilities come back into production.

Boucher is also concerned with a health insurance crisis: "There are 46 million Americans with no health insurance, one million more than last year." Boucher said the uninsured cause health care costs to increase for those with insurance. "Costs that are not recovered are passed along to everyone else, which in turn increases the number of people without insurance."

He proposes a tax credit, much like the Earned Income Credit. It would allow people with need to afford to purchase private health insurance.

In a related issue, Boucher said he opposes a plan to reduce Medicaid by \$10 billion over five years. "People depend on Medicaid in a major way in this Congressional District, a far larger percentage of people are eligible here than the national average. Two thirds of the people in nursing homes are eligible for Medicaid."

He is also opposed to a plan to privatize Social Security. "There is not a financial crisis with Social Security. If Congress does nothing, there is ample funding to pay all benefits through 2042. There is a surplus through 2018.

"About every 20 years Congress has to make adjustments. If there are future needs for adjustments, there can be minor adjustments, not radical change. This is the single most successful program of the last seven decades."

Boucher is co-sponsoring a bill to allow news reporters to refrain from revealing confidential news sources in federal cases. "Already there are 31 states and the District of Columbia that have shield laws for state cases. The public has a right to know. When an insider talks, he has a lot to lose and it is in the public interest to protect confidentiality."

Boucher sees broadband and wide fidelity as technologies that can boost rural economies. "In the past, corridors such canals, railroads, and interstate highways were the keys to economic growth. Now these arteries are the broadband pathways."

Boucher also wants to return the Federal Emergency Management Agency to independent status. Moving the agency under Homeland Security after the 9/11 terrorist attacks hindered FEMA in its primary mission of dealing with natural disasters, Boucher observed. "In the 1990s, the Agency was given high marks. Now they have to work through four levels of bureaucracy. The tragic consequences are seen in the wake of Hurricane Katrina."

Boucher added several new opportunities are available in agriculture. "Since last year there has been a dramatic increase in hair sheep, a breed grown exclusively for eating. The return on investment for farmers is greater than burley tobacco. The breed seems to thrive in this terrain."

Demand is also increasing for grass-fed beef for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Boucher said he plans to hold another of his traditional town meetings in Floyd later this year.

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