

State and Local

A&M Congressman explains stands on AIDS problem, Medicare act



Photo by Robert W. Rizzo

Republican congressman Joe Barton prepares to answer questions from local residents.

By Lee Schexnaider
Staff Writer

U.S. Rep. Joe Barton explained his concern about the AIDS problem and explained why he voted against the Medicare Catastrophic Protection Act in a town meeting Thursday morning at the Brazos County Courthouse.

"I am really worried about it because it is a contagious disease and it kills people," Barton said to the standing-room-only audience.

"It has been killing people in the homosexual community and intravenous drug users," he said. "It is now spreading to the heterosexual population; 39,000 people have died from it already in the United States. There are people in Brazos County who have the disease. There are people who die from it. And if you get it you're dead."

Barton took an impromptu poll of the people at the town meeting on the acquired immune deficiency syndrome. He found the majority of people who answered were concerned about the disease.

Barton said the government should try to provide a cure, vaccine and treatment for those who have AIDS, and that the disease should be treated as a public health issue and not a social issue.

"I am personally not sympathetic to the lifestyles of the homosexual community," Barton said. "However . . . to those who have it, we need to do whatever we can to make sure they don't infect other people."

Barton discussed some of the problems involved in passing and enforcing laws regarding the deadly disease.

"We can pass laws to prevent its spread to the general population," he said. "When you start talking about passing laws you're talking about testing. How do you test? Do you test? When do you test? Do you make it mandatory or voluntary?"

Barton said one of the most important topics to come out of the meeting was a discussion on the Medicare Catastrophic Protection Act that the U.S. House of Representatives passed on July 22.

Addressing the many elderly per-

sons in the audience, he explained why he disagreed with the major thrust of the bill.

"That bill is a catastrophe," Barton said. "It's a catastrophe for your pocketbook and everyone's pocketbook."

"I voted against that bill. I am not opposed to catastrophic health care for senior citizens, but your definition of catastrophic health care and that bill are not the same."

"When you talk about catastrophic health coverage, what I think you mean is something to deal with long-term, health-care cost if you have to go to a nursing home. This bill doesn't deal with that at all. It doesn't touch it."

He criticized the American Association of Retired Persons for refusing to support the bill unless a provision for prescription drug expense — which they favored — was included. The House passed the bill with the provision, which included a \$500 deductible, plus a charge of up to \$20 per year, for prescription drugs.

In addition, he said, the bill will

increase senior citizens' tax bill, because it contains an additional income tax that would be mandatory and would increase some Medicare premiums.

"You're going to pay an income tax surtax that no one else pays," he said. "Only senior citizens will pay that surtax. You will also pay an increased premium for Medicare Part B. And it's not going to be voluntary, its going to be mandatory. The whole thing is going to be mandatory. There isn't going to be anything voluntary about it."

He advised citizens to contact their senators because the bill already has passed the House and now will move on to the U.S. Senate.

In other discussion, Barton expressed his support of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

"The current sentiment in Congress is ambivalence," he said. "Everyone wants to spend the money on research and then some want to spend the money to deploy the benefits of the research. I am one of the ones who would want to spend the money."

House asks USDA to help pay for new institute

WASHINGTON (AP) — Most of the Texas delegation united Thursday in a request that the U.S. Department of Agriculture pay half the cost of a planned \$25 million advanced biotechnology center in Houston.

The new Institute of Biosciences and Technology in Houston would merge the agricultural, veterinary and engineering expertise of Texas A&M University with the world-class medical skills at Houston's Medical Center Complex to form a center focused on diet-related medical research.

House members signed a letter written by Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, urging the USDA to pay half of the cost.

The letter was sent to Agriculture Secretary Richard E. Lyng.
Dr. John P. Jordan, administrator of USDA's

Cooperative State Research Service, praised the idea and said he has already told officials at Texas A&M that he will work with them to help develop an acceptable proposal.

"It is a very reasonable possibility," Jordan said in a telephone interview. "Houston has just loads of quality people and A&M is one of the top institutions of its kind."

"The meshing of those two makes good sense."

The letter was signed by Bentsen, Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, and 25 of the 27 Texas House members.

Bentsen wrote, "Your department is authorized to provide matching funds for construction of agricultural research facilities. Texas A&M is eligible for and would like to apply for funds under this program."

The letter noted that many medical problems, such as arteriosclerosis, are diet-related and said a program combining agricultural, medical and nutritional research could lead to the development of foods tailored for specific health needs.

The Congress must authorize the \$12.5 million expenditure by the USDA before the project is formally cleared and the state must come up with the matching \$12.5 million.

Meanwhile, Jordan said he would work closely with the project organizers to meet program and facility merit tests.

Bentsen spokesman Jack DeVore said a letter has been sent to Sen. Quentin Burdick, D-N.D., chairman of the agriculture subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, asking that an initial \$50,000 be appropriated for a feasibility study.



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