

Congressman

Vern Ehlers

Serving Michigan's Third District
U.S. House of Representatives • Spring 2005



SPRING 2005
CONGRESSMAN
VERN EHLERS

CONGRESS OF
THE UNITED STATES

Serving Michigan's
Third District

District Office:
Grand Rapids

110 Michigan Street NW, Suite 166
Gerald R. Ford Federal Building
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-2313
(616) 451-8383

Washington Office:

1714 Longworth House
Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 225-3831

Web Page Address:

www.house.gov/ehlers



April 2005

Dear Friends:

When I am in Washington, D.C., working as your representative in the Congress, I am constantly reminded of our nation's abundant history and of the marvelous heritage of our democratic institutions. No matter where you are in Washington, there are statues, monuments and memorials to our great leaders and events, great museums celebrating our nation's history and buildings that are truly the "temples" of democracy.

If you have never been to D.C., I strongly recommend that you visit Washington to see these wonderful institutions – after all, your tax dollars pay for them! I am sure you will be inspired. I still have that sense of awe every time I walk into the Capitol, and I feel honored to have served you in Congress for more than a decade.

Over the past year, one of my key areas of focus has been the passage of a new federal transportation bill, which will provide funding for repairing our existing roads, building new roads and a variety of public transportation projects. I have been working very hard to ensure that Michigan gets its fair share of gas-tax funding. The bill has passed the House and I hope that, by the time you read this, the Senate will have approved it and sent it to the president for his signature. If approved, this legislation is expected to provide nearly \$200 million a year more in federal funding for Michigan's roads – something we desperately need to maintain our roadways and bridges.

In this newsletter, you will find reports on some key issues facing Congress, as well as information about how my office can help you and how you can communicate with me and my staff. Additionally, you will find an announcement of my upcoming town meetings, which will be held April 16 in Lake Odessa and Hastings and April 23 in Grand Rapids. I hope to see you at one of those meetings!

May God bless you, and may we all be a blessing to God!

With best wishes, I am sincerely,

My Committee Assignments

As your congressman, I have a variety of duties in the House of Representatives. Here is a list of the committees and subcommittees on which I serve:

**Education and the
Workforce Committee**
Subcommittees:
Education Reform
21st Century Competitiveness

Science Committee
Subcommittees:
Energy
Chairman:
Environment,
Standards and Technology

**Transportation & Infrastructure
Committee**
Subcommittees:
Aviation
Water Resources and Environment

House Administration Committee
•
**House/Senate Committee
on the Library of Congress**

Visit Our Website

Thanks to the Internet, we can provide you with information that you will find useful and interesting. By visiting our website, you can:

- ✓ Subscribe to a weekly e-newsletter;
- ✓ Send a message by clicking on “**Write Your Rep**”;
- ✓ Read our latest news releases;
- ✓ View legislation sponsored by Congressman Ehlers;
- ✓ Access a visitor’s guide to Washington, D.C.;
- ✓ Link to a wide variety of organizations of interest to the Third Congressional District and a history of people who have represented our area in Congress;
- ✓ Link to Constituent Services;
- ✓ Link to other governmental organizations;
- ✓ And much, much more!

We are always interested in improving the services we provide you through the Internet, so if you have any suggestions about how our website can be more useful, please don’t hesitate to let us know!

www.house.gov/ehlers



A Good Year for the Great Lakes

It has been a very exciting year for Great Lakes clean up and protection! I have been able to make significant progress on many of my goals for improving the environmental quality of the lakes for all of us.

Collaboration

Last year, one of my priorities was to improve the region’s planning and coordination to make better use of the money we spend on environmental programs. On Dec. 3, 2004, I was pleased to join then-EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt, five Great Lakes state governors, and numerous Members of Congress, mayors, state legislators and Native American tribal officials in pledging our support for protecting and restoring the environmental health of the Great Lakes. The gathering was prompted by President Bush’s May 2004 order in which he named a Cabinet-level task force to coordinate Great Lakes cleanup programs and to develop a regional collaboration among federal agencies, states and Canada. The goal of this effort is to develop a specific and comprehensive strategy – an *action plan* – for implementing federal, state and local programs and projects in a coordinated, efficient and effective way. A broad coalition of lawmakers, agency officials, environmental advocates and other interested stakeholders and citizens are now working together to reduce pollution, protect wetlands and beaches, and clean up contaminated sediments. A preliminary action plan is scheduled to be released for public comment this summer.



A U.S. Fish and Wildlife officer displays an Asian carp that was caught in the Illinois River in 2002. An extremely aggressive and voracious invasive species, the carp are considered the next major biological threat to the Great Lakes ecosystem. Congress approved funding for a permanent electrical barrier on the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Canal to prevent the fish’s migration into Lake Michigan. (Photo courtesy University of Wisconsin Sea Grant program)

Invasive Species

Another one of my priorities for protecting the Great Lakes is to reduce the introduction and spread of waterborne pests such as the zebra mussel, the sea lamprey and the Asian carp. I am pleased that the U.S. Coast Guard is developing long-overdue standards to regulate the ballast water of ships, which is a primary pathway

for these pests to come in. I also introduced a bill to research the best way to manage ballast water, so as to stop these invaders from entering the U.S. One noteworthy success in the fight against these so-called “invasive species” came in October 2004, when Congress provided funding to the Army Corps of Engineers to complete construction of a second, permanent electric barrier to help prevent the spread of Asian carp (*pictured*) from the Mississippi River to the Great Lakes through the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Canal. Getting these barriers completed is critical to the protection of the Great Lakes ecosystem. We cannot afford to have another infestation that could damage the Great Lakes as much as, or even worse than, the zebra mussel. Asian carp, which have already invaded the Mississippi River watershed, compete with native species for food, living space and spawning areas. These non-native fish grow to up to 150 pounds, eat up to 40 percent of their body weight every day, and each female can carry up to a million eggs. If the Asian carp reach Lake Michigan, they could devastate the Great Lakes ecosystem, ruin sports fishing and endanger our multi-billion dollar commercial fishing industry. The electric barrier is only a stop-gap measure; we will need to find permanent methods to protect the Great Lakes against these and other invaders.



Restoration and Protection

To provide the funding necessary for Great Lakes restoration and protection, I have written legislation that will combine several Great Lakes environmental programs in one comprehensive package. The bill provides \$4 billion for Great Lakes programs over a six-year period, including \$640 million specifically for fisheries, ecosystem preservation and wildlife restoration activities. More than 40 percent of the funding – \$1.65 billion – is directed to cleaning up sediments in the worst of the rivers and harbors contaminated with years of pollution. Twenty percent of the funding in the bill is directed to research and monitoring activities in the basin, which will be crucial to the successful implementation and oversight of restoration efforts. Finally, the bill provides \$20 billion over five years to assist communities with the critical task of upgrading and improving their sewers to help prevent overflows and the discharge of untreated sewage into our waterways. Grand Rapids has been a national example in taking the initiative to improve its sewer systems, and the revolving loan fund in the bill will help other communities follow suit in a fiscally responsible way.

I remain committed to finding practical and workable solutions to protecting our precious Great Lakes.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Education

Recently, international test results have shown alarming trends in student performance in science and math. The U.S. isn’t keeping pace with other developed countries, and is even outpaced by several undeveloped countries in these subjects. But things are changing. Thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, our students are tested on their proficiency in math and reading. In the 2007-08 school year, science testing will be added, allowing us to track and address problems in these key subject areas. Test scores are slowly beginning to improve, but we have more work to do.



As fewer students choose to study math and the sciences, our domestic talent pool is shrinking. In a recent editorial, Intel Corp. CEO Craig Barrett commented, “... if the world’s best engineers are produced in India or Singapore, that is where our companies will go. This is not a threat, but a reality in the modern world. We locate facilities where we can find or import talent to produce our products.”

One of my priorities is to ensure that our companies can find a well-educated workforce here at home. Today’s job market and the jobs of the future require an understanding of math and science concepts in addition to strong reading skills. In fact, today’s family sedan contains more computers than the Apollo 11 spacecraft that went to the moon in 1969. To help our educational system in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), last summer I started a bipartisan, Congressional member organization called the **STEM Education Caucus**. The Caucus supports improving education in science, technology, engineering and math subjects at all levels – from kindergarten through higher education. The level of interest in the Caucus is growing. I am excited that more than 60 other Members of Congress have joined the Caucus in their support of its mission, and the Senate has organized its own STEM Caucus. We also are receiving substantial help and encouragement from major employers that are eager to hire well-trained technical workers at good wages.

Our children deserve a quality education. We must ensure that they receive one that equips them for future success.

To learn more about the STEM Education Caucus, visit my website at www.house.gov/ehlers



Social Security – Is Reform Needed?

Social Security is a social insurance program that provides income to retired seniors, surviving spouses and minors, and people with disabilities. It is paid for by working Americans and their employers through a payroll tax on wages. It is listed as FICA (Federal Insurance Contribution Act) on your pay stub. People often think of their Social Security benefits as an actual account, in their name, which contains cash or investments. But, that is not the case. Social Security is a “pay-as-you-go” program. The money collected today is being used to pay current retiree benefits. When today’s workers retire, their benefits will have to be paid for by future workers and employers.

How Does Social Security Affect Michigan?

About 5.5 million Michigan residents worked in Social Security-covered employment in 2003. Combined, their earnings totaled about \$157 billion and these workers paid about \$19.5 billion in Social Security taxes. In total, about 1.7 million Michigan residents received Social Security benefits in 2003. The total amount of benefits provided totaled about \$1.5 billion, with the average retired worker receiving about \$993 per month.

What’s the Problem with the Current System?

America’s age distribution has changed significantly since Social Security was created in 1935. Back then, people, on average, lived until they were about 62 years old. Now the average life expectancy is about 77. What this means is that today people are relying on Social Security for a decade or more, which was not expected when the program was created.

Since Americans are living longer, there are more people collecting Social Security and fewer workers to support each retiree. In 1950, there were 16 workers to support every one retiree receiving Social Security benefits. Today, there are only about 3.3 workers supporting every one retiree. By the time today’s younger workers turn 65, there will be only two workers to support every one retiree.

Simply put, right now there are enough workers to support retirees. But, in a few years, when the baby boomers begin to retire in large numbers, that will no longer be the case. It won’t be long before the taxes that workers pay into the system will not be able to keep pace with the funds needed to pay out benefits to retirees for the rest of their lives. Without considerable tax increases or substantial benefit cuts, the current sys-

Michigan Social Security Statistics		
Category of beneficiaries	Number of beneficiaries	Average monthly benefit for category
Retired workers	1,045,410	\$993
Disabled workers	215,210	\$919
Surviving spouses	182,950	\$932
Spouses of retired or disabled workers	101,400	\$497
Minor children of deceased, retired or disabled workers	149,510	\$639 (Deceased) \$499 (Retired) \$268 (Disabled)
Source: Social Security Administration, 2003 statistics		

tem will not be financially sustainable for future generations and will inevitably collapse.

What are the Consequences of Doing Nothing?

While some claim that Social Security is in no danger of going broke, the reality is that Social Security needs to be fixed and the falling ratio of workers to retirees proves this. Without reform, the Social Security trust fund will be empty by 2042 and benefits would need to be reduced across-the-board. For example,

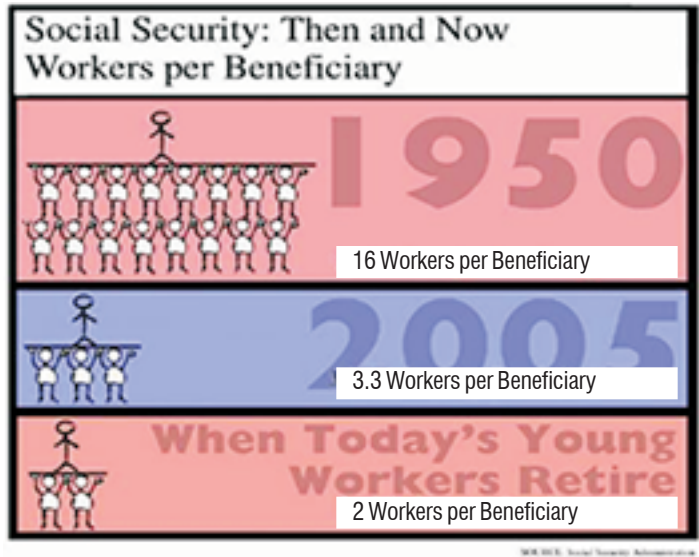
- If you are 45 years old now, in 2043, at the age of 83, your scheduled benefits would be cut by 25 percent.
- If you are 25 years old now, in 2047, when you retire at age 67, your scheduled benefits would be cut by 26 percent.
- If your children or grandchildren are 5 years old now, in 2067, when they retire at age 67, their scheduled benefits would be cut by 29 percent.

As you can see from these examples, without reform, younger workers and our children and grandchildren will not receive their scheduled benefits. In fact, without reform the current system owes \$10.4 trillion more (in present value) in promised benefits than it can afford to pay. Without reform, each passing year adds an additional \$600 billion to the cost of permanently fixing Social Security.

What Happens Next?

We need to solve problems and not pass them on to future Congresses and future generations. We need to permanently strengthen Social Security for future generations.

As your Representative, I am very interested to hear what you think about Social Security reform. I am particularly interested in hearing from current and future workers who are 55 and younger. Please visit one of my town meetings or contact me via one of the methods listed in this newsletter.



Message to Retirees and Near Retirees

Your benefits will not be touched. Congress is committed to maintaining Social Security for today’s retirees and those nearing retirement while working to strengthen Social Security for our children and grandchildren. If you are retired or are nearing retirement, your benefits will not be reduced.

Message to Younger Workers

The solution to strengthening Social Security for today’s younger workers will not come in the form of one simple fix. It will require a combination of common-sense solutions. Congress is in the early stages of identifying what can and should make up this comprehensive approach. Some ideas include:

- ✓ Allowing younger workers to invest in personal accounts, similar to IRAs and 401 (k)s;
- ✓ Increasing the payroll rate. Currently, employees and employers pay a combined 12.4 percent Social Security payroll tax on the first \$90,000 of income;
- ✓ Increasing the \$90,000 wage cap so that workers would pay payroll taxes on all of their earnings or up to a new cap;
- ✓ Increasing the retirement age. When created, Social Security retirement age was 65, with early retirement at lower benefits allowed at 62. The retirement age is increasing to 67 due to reforms enacted in the mid-1980s. Further reforms could raise the age to 69 or older, although early retirement could be allowed with lower benefits;
- ✓ Modernizing the way benefits are calculated. Currently, benefit increases are calculated based on national increases in average wages. Since wages tend to grow faster than the cost of living, benefit calculations could be tied to cost of living rather than wages.

Any efforts to reform Social Security will be extensively debated, may include a combination of approaches and will likely be phased-in gradually.

Helping You



Dealing with federal agencies sometimes can be frustrating and time consuming. We are available to help relieve some of that frustration. Providing assistance to you is our primary priority. While we cannot force an agency to act in your favor or promise you the result you want, we can cut through red tape and help make sure you get a fair hearing.

Areas in which we can provide help include (but are not limited to): Military and Veterans’ Affairs, Social Security, Medicare, Passports, Immigration, the Internal Revenue Service, Housing, the U.S Postal Service and Student Loans. Links to many of these agencies are available through our webpage (www.house.gov/ehlers).

For your privacy protection, federal law requires that we obtain your written permission before contacting an agency on your behalf. Please contact the Grand Rapids office for information about how to obtain a “Privacy Release Form” so that we may help you.

Communicating with Congressman Ehlers

E-mail

I am interested in hearing from you about what is happening in Congress and our federal government. There are a variety of ways you can communicate with me. If you want to comment or inquire about a legislative matter, please direct your correspondence to my Washington, D.C., office. If you are seeking assistance with a problem you have, you should contact my Grand Rapids office.

Due to security concerns, all postal mail to the U.S. Congress undergoes extensive screening, which slows delivery of your message. Of course, the U.S. Postal Service will get your message to me, but if you need quick assistance, I highly recommend e-mailing, calling or faxing your message instead.

On the Internet, go to: www.house.gov/ehlers, then, click on: **“Write Your Rep”**

Washington Office

1714 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515-2203
Phone: (202) 225-3831
Fax: (202) 225-5144

Grand Rapids Office

110 Michigan St. NW, Suite 166
Gerald R. Ford Federal Building
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-2313
Phone: (616) 451-8383
Fax: (616) 454-5630



Town Meetings and Special Events
Saturday, April 16 Saturday, April 23

LAKE ODESSA
Town Meeting
9 a.m. – 10 a.m.
The Page Memorial Bldg.
Council Chambers
839 4th Avenue, Lake Odessa

HASTINGS
Town Meeting
11 a.m. – 12 noon
Hastings City Hall, Council Chambers
201 East State St., Hastings



GRAND RAPIDS
Town Meeting
9 a.m. – 10 a.m.

Medal of Merit Ceremony
10:30 a.m. – 12 noon

Congressional High School Art Competition
12 noon – 1 p.m.

All April 23 events above to take place at:
Gerald R. Ford Museum
303 Pearl St. NW, Grand Rapids

Persons requiring special accommodations at any of these events should contact my Grand Rapids office at (616) 451-8383 at least 48 hours prior to the scheduled event.

American Flags

United States flags that have been flown over the U.S. Capitol are available for purchase through my Washington office. You may request, by calling or writing in advance, that your flag be flown for special occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays and graduations. All orders must be paid for in advance. For more information, including an up-to-date price list, contact my office or visit the “Constituent Services” section of my webpage, www.house.ehlers/guide.html.





CONGRESSMAN VERNON EHLERS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Official Business



M.C.
PRSRT STD
ECWRSS

Weekly Updates in the Ehlers e-Newsletter

Every week that the U.S. House of Representatives is in session, you can stay informed about what is happening in the House by subscribing to my electronic newsletter, the ***Ehlers e-Newsletter***. To subscribe, visit my website – www.house.gov/ehlers – click on “e-Newsletter,” follow the instructions and – *presto!* – you will receive an e-mail from me each week that the House is in session. You can also view past issues in the Archives on my website.

Sign up now!

POSTAL CUSTOMER
3RD CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
MICHIGAN