



2009-10 Legislative Agenda

The Rockport-Fulton Chamber of Commerce recognizes the fiscal and philosophical legislative challenges facing our nation. In view of this, the Chamber supports initiatives deemed crucial to our business community including education excellence for the continued economic prosperity in our City, County, State and Nation.

Education

In business today, no competition is tougher than the global race for talent. In every industry, every job sector, and every part of the world, employers are asking the same question:

How are we going to find, train, and retain the best workers?

Ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs in America require at least two years of postsecondary education. Over the next several years, the U.S. Department of Labor predicts there will be roughly four million new job openings in health care, education, and computer sciences alone. At the same time, nearly seventy eight million baby boomers are heading toward retirement. Yet, the nation's young people remain unprepared either to replace those workers or to fill new positions in high-growth areas—today, a third of all students do not finish high school. Up to half of those who do graduate lack the advanced literacy and math skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce.

Further, given the quickening pace of change in workplace technology and the growing demand for flexible, highly-skilled employees in all sectors of the economy, not even the most experienced workers can afford to rely on existing skills. To remain competitive, businesses must invest not just in the preparation and recruitment of new talent, but also the continuing development of workers at all stages of their careers.

Unless America makes dramatic improvements in education and workforce training, it will pay a terrible price, risking its place as an economic superpower and its identity as a striving, middle-class democracy.

Health Care

When it comes to our health care system, most of us agree that America is ready for a change. The plans proposed by Congress are not the solution we need. If you look at the numbers, you'll see that a government-run approach to health insurance is not only a bad idea for patients, but is also fiscally reckless and will make health care costs higher in the long-run.

No matter how it is initially structured, a government-run plan would, over time, dismantle employer-based coverage. By setting artificially low prices, a government-run plan would significantly increase costs for those who remain in private coverage, and would add additional liabilities to the federal budget.

Today, we have the opportunity to create a health care system for the future – building on what works and fixing what's broken.

Doctors and Patients

People in countries with government-run plans find that patient access to care is affected. This is the inevitable result when, rather than focusing on fixing the delivery system and finding better ways to pay providers and implement efficiencies, the government instead focuses on taxes, mandates and new bureaucracy.

The Economy

None of the proposed plans take into account the incredible costs associated with this kind of broad reform. Government-run health care is an expense that our economy simply cannot bear. Just think, costs associated with other government-run programs like Medicare, Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) consistently have outgrown budget projections. Many economists believe that this amount of spending is not sustainable. In fact, according to government actuaries, the unfunded liabilities of current government-run health care programs are in the tens of trillions of dollars.

Business Impact

A government-run plan that would have broad and unrivaled power to negotiate for low-cost services of doctors and other health care providers could put private insurers out of business.

Businesses may be forced to pay a fee equal to 8% of their payroll, which could put them in the tough position of having to cut jobs or delay plans for growth. Roughly half of all private sector workers could be adversely affected because their small business employers can least afford this additional tax.

Employers also could face paying a tax even if they provide their employees with health insurance. Under one of the proposals in Congress, employers with 50 or more employees would have to pay a tax if an employee chooses to enter a health insurance “exchange” and forgo their employer sponsored insurance.

Rising Taxes

At the end of the day, businesses and consumers will be stuck paying higher costs – as new taxes are levied on health care providers, insurance providers, certain individuals and businesses to help pay for reforms and the government-run health plan.

Taxes currently under consideration by Congress include:

- Making insurance companies pay a 40% tax on higher-value health care plans (so-called “Cadillac plans”). Such a tax could impact lower and middle class Americans, as these costs could be passed down to all health plans, not just Cadillac plans.
- Employer pay-or-play requirements that could amount to as much as 8% of payroll, forcing employers to make a choice between providing health care they can’t afford or laying off employees.
- Taxes on individual income that will hurt small business and, because the taxes are not indexed to inflation, cost the middle class hundreds of billions of dollars in the coming years.
- The Joint Committee on Taxation has found that 1/3 of those hit with the new “surtax” are small businesses.
- Increased taxes on health savings accounts.



Capitol of the United States

Transportation

America's transportation and infrastructure system, once a marvel of the modern world, has been stretched beyond its capacity and has fallen into disrepair. A decaying transportation system costs our economy more than \$78 billion annually in lost time and fuel. The Rockport-Fulton Chamber advocates for a comprehensive approach to solving the nation's looming transportation infrastructure crisis. Specifically, the Chamber believes that a multi-modal and intermodal vision must increase capacity, reduce congestion, and improve the efficient, safe, sustainable movement of goods and people throughout the country and world.

We will continue mobilize our grassroots network to ensure the business community is an active participant in the coming debates on the transportation infrastructure crisis and leads the way to comprehensive solutions.

Technology

Outdated laws and regulations impede U.S. technological innovation and deployment that are so vital to the U.S. economy. The Rockport-Fulton Chamber promotes market-based solutions, policies that foster investment in technology research and deployment, and balanced regulatory treatment of technical platforms.

Additionally, the Rockport-Fulton Chamber advocates for: workable privacy laws that protect consumers without unduly inhibiting e-commerce, protection of intellectual property rights, and access to international markets.

Energy

To secure America's long-term energy security, America must reexamine outdated and entrenched positions, become better informed about the sources of our fuel and power, and make judgments based on facts, sound science, and good American common sense.

The Rockport-Fulton Chamber is working to ensure affordable, reliable, and diverse energy supplies. We support efforts on the local and national level to improve environmental stewardship, promote economic growth, and strengthen national security.

The decisions that our political leadership makes on energy in the coming years will affect Americans for generations to come. Future generations deserve the proper far-sighted decisions that will help keep America secure, clean, and prosperous.



Capitol of Texas

Labor

The "Employee Free Choice Act"--better known as the **Card Check** bill--is a proposed law that would change how unions are allowed to organize workers in the United States. Big labor unions like the AFL-CIO, SEIU, and the Change to Win Coalition spent heavily during the 2009 election, and are pushing Congress to approve this law. Union membership has been declining--currently about 7.5 percent in the private sector--and they hope this law will change the rules and reverse that trend.

The Rockport-Fulton Chamber strongly opposes this legislation. There are three problems with Card Check:

1. Eliminating the Private Ballot

Card Check would effectively eliminate private voting.

Under the existing law today, workers have a chance to vote for or against unionization in a private-ballot election that is federally supervised. Under Card Check, if more than 50% of workers at a facility sign a card, the government would have to certify the union, and **a private ballot election would be prohibited--even if workers want one.**

By forcing workers to sign a card in public--instead of vote in private--Card Check opens the door to intimidation and coercion. **Over 70% of voters agree that a private election is better than card check.**

2. Government Arbitration and Control

Card Check could put government regulators in charge of private business decisions.

Once a union is certified, the business and union would only have 120 days to reach agreement, before facing the prospect of being forced into binding arbitration. This means a panel of government arbitrators who may have no understanding of the business could impose a two year contract deciding all workplace terms--**without any vote by the company or its employees.**

By placing government regulators in charge of a two-year decision, business flexibility is limited--at a time in our history when it is needed most. **A recent poll found that 75% of voters believe government arbitrators should not decide the conditions of a union contract.**

3. Harsh New Penalties for Businesses

Card Check would unfairly punish businesses.

Card Check would impose harsh new penalties on businesses--but not on unions--for violations during the union recognition process. This is unfair, and potentially disastrous for small or medium businesses, who are not familiar with unionizing campaigns or the National Labor Relations Act. If Card Check passes, many of these businesses would be facing unionization for the first time.

Mission Statement:

The mission of the Rockport-Fulton Chamber of Commerce is to work in partnership with businesses, individuals and governmental entities to promote commerce and tourism while maintaining the environment.

Financial Regulation

The Obama Administration has proposed, and the House is moving forward on, legislation to create a massive new government agency to regulate consumer financial products. This new agency, the Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA) would have unprecedented powers and authority to determine the types of financial products consumers can choose from. In fact, the bill extends far beyond traditional financial services products to a vast majority of the economy – in short creating a new regulatory overlay over the entire business community.

The Rockport-Fulton Chamber supports more effective consumer protection that is centered on ensuring consumers have access to clear and concise disclosures about risks posed by financial products, and on weeding out the fraudulent and predatory actors.

On the contrary, this bill simply grows the government, putting new restrictions on consumer access to products, reducing choices among products catered to the needs of individual consumers, and driving up the costs of these products by making it more expensive to develop and offer them. It even goes so far as to dictate and require “plain vanilla” products, assuming federal bureaucrats know what is best for consumers.

In addition, rather than adopt a national standard to streamline and bring uniformity to disclosures, the bill simply adds the CFPA to the maze of regulators that require conflicting and confusing disclosures about the risks consumers are exposed to when they buy financial products.

Lastly, the bill is a direct affront on the privacy and security of consumer financial information. The CFPA would have unchecked authority to request and hold account information from financial institutions – including information regarding the type of account you hold and your balance.

This is not the way to protect consumers. The Rockport-Fulton Chamber will support efforts to insure consumers have the information they need and are protected from predatory and other illegal practices. We will oppose efforts that fail to address the weaknesses of our current regulatory structure by simply adding new layers of government. We look forward to working with Congress on a plan that is clear and will actually help consumers.

Developed by the 2009-10 Governmental Affairs Committee of the Rockport-Fulton Chamber and adopted by the Board of Directors February 2010.