

June 14, 2001

**OP-ED BY U.S. REPRESENTATIVE JAN SCHAKOWSKY -
PRIORITIES FOR THE 9TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - From the rising cost of energy, to school construction and modernization, to election and postal reform, members of Congress are debating and voting every day on economic and social issues that directly impact the daily lives of Chicagoans and the residents of the 9th Congressional District. Our community definitely feels the consequences of the action, and often, the inaction, in Washington.

GASOLINE PRICES

Take the price of gasoline, for example. We are paying some of the highest prices in the nation for a gallon of gas. Families are canceling summer vacations and businesses are losing thousands of dollars. Meanwhile, big oil is reaping record profits. The good news is that the Senate is now holding a series of hearings on oil industry pricing methods and alleged anti-competitive practices to give consumers answers and some relief.

I have been very disappointed in the Bush Administration's failure to provide any immediate relief for our energy woes. I have repeatedly called on him to call in his friends from the big oil and big gas companies, as well as the oil producing nations, and insist on their cooperation to bring prices down. Instead, he has proposed an energy plan that relies almost exclusively on more drilling and more building of nuclear power plants, while cutting funding for energy efficiency and the development of clean, renewable sources of energy. There is even serious talk about drilling for oil in Lake Michigan.

NATURAL GAS PRICES

Many residents are still feeling the pinch of last winter's heating bills. I requested the General Accounting Office (GAO) to investigate the factors that led to consumers in Chicago paying exorbitant prices. I did that after the natural gas producers failed to give me an adequate justification for the more than doubling of their costs. The investigation should be completed within the next six to eight months, and I plan to closely monitor its progress. I want answers so that we don't face another winter of excessive gas bill.

EDUCATION

There is no issue more important to our future than the education of our children. Illinois currently has approximately 60 school buildings that are over 100 years old and it would cost one billion dollars to replace them. Nationwide, eleven million students - one in every four - attend inadequate school facilities, many in our own neighborhoods.

I am working with my colleagues in Congress to pass the bipartisan school modernization bill that would help states and localities with their staggering school infrastructure needs by funding tax credits to pay the interest on \$25 billion in school modernization bonds. This would allow us to repair, rewire, and update our schools, as well as build additions and new schools to relieve overcrowding. Our children deserve nothing less.□

ELECTION REFORM□

Florida wasn't the only place where voters were disenfranchised in last November's election. The City of Chicago had the most error-ridden presidential election of any major U.S. city, with 123,000 uncounted ballots. In May, I convened a Chicago hearing of the Democratic Caucus Special Committee on Election Reform, one of many to be held across the country, my colleagues and I heard from hundreds of voters about their experiences with the ballot and at the polling places. We will use that valuable testimony to craft legislation that guarantees every voter the right to vote and every vote to be counted. Federal dollars are needed to help localities upgrade equipment, increase voter education, and set national standards.□

AFFORDABLE PRESCRIPTION DRUGS, MEDICARE AND SOCIAL SECURITY□

Many older people in our community are having great difficulty paying for necessary medication. Congress should act this year to pass a quality prescription drug benefit under Medicare that is affordable and comprehensive. No senior should have to decide between paying the rent or buying food and taking his or her medication.□

I will be working overtime to prevent any cuts in Social Security and Medicare, including efforts to privatize them. Under no circumstance should benefits be reduced in order to pay for a huge tax cut, the bulk of which is going to the wealthiest Americans. Privatization schemes supported by the Administration and others in Congress are guaranteed to lower Social Security benefits and cut Medicare services and I will use all means possible to ensure that will never happen.□

POSTAL SERVICE□

I am also working to improve postal service and to prevent Saturday service from being eliminated. Postal customers in the Chicago area do not want to pay the price for financial problems at the United States Postal Service. While we are aware that steps must be taken to address recent financial woes at the USPS, Congress is working to ensure that the Postal Service meets the needs of consumers without cutting Saturday service, imposing unreasonable price hikes, and taking away the collective bargaining rights of postal workers.