

WISPIRG

Standing Up To Powerful Interests

Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group
Citizen Advocate: A Report For Members Of WISPIRG

Winter 2010 • Vol. 23, No. 2

Find links to resources and actions at www.wispirg.org/newsletters

Health Care

WI Business Owners Need Health Reform

New WISPIRG research found that small businesses pay an average of 18 percent more than large employers for health insurance. Like individual consumers, small businesses lack the negotiating power to get a better deal. They can also experience enormous increases in premiums if just one employee gets ill.

WI Small Business Owners Have Day in DC

Building on these findings, WISPIRG spent much of the summer and fall engaging small business owners in the health care debate.

In November, we worked in partnership with PIRGs across the country to send a cross-section of more than 100 small business owners to Washington, D.C., including three Wisconsin small business owners, to meet with the administration and with lawmakers not yet committed to reform.

"It's hard for a politician to categorize health reform as anti-business when droves of small business owners are telling them that they need reform, that the status quo is untenable," said Shannon Nelson, WISPIRG Program Associate.

Students Rally for Reform

Also in November, WISPIRG sponsored a forum on the UW-Madison campus to discuss how the health care reform proposals will benefit students and young people. Hundreds of students were joined by

Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin, who shared her thoughts on health care reform.

As this newsletter goes to print, strong health care reform bills that would reduce costs and increase competition in the marketplace have passed both the U.S. House and Senate. ■



SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS HAVE DAY IN D.C.—Led by WISPIRG Program Associate Shannon Nelson (bottom left) with Congressman Kagen, WISPIRG helped fly more than 100 small business owners to Capitol Hill.

Toxics & Public Health

Reducing Toxic Exposure Among Kids

A bill to reduce children's exposure to toxic chemicals has started moving through the state legislature. In November and January, both the state Senate and Assembly held hearings on the BPA-Free Kids Act.

WISPIRG has worked with Sen. Julie Lassa and Rep. Kelda Helen Roys to draft the bill, which would ban the sale and manufacture of baby bottles and sippy cups containing bisphenol A (BPA) in Wisconsin.

"Parents should not have to be chemists to know what products are safe for their kids," said Bruce Speight, WISPIRG director. "Wisconsin should take action to protect our kids from BPA." ■

BPA, a synthetic sex hormone that mimics estrogen, is linked to cancer, early onset diabetes, hyperactivity and obesity.

"Despite numerous independent, peer-reviewed studies that have linked BPA to serious health effects, the plastics and chemical industry have worked hard to influence government studies and reports and to halt government action," Speight stated in testimony. "Powerful special interests such as the chemical and plastics industries should not be drafting government reports about their own products and undermining efforts to reduce the exposure of our children to toxic chemicals." ■

Member Action

Sign our Toxic-Free Kids petition to state legislators on our Web site, www.wispirg.org.

Consumer Protection

Not So Safe Toys On Store Shelves

WISPIRG's 24th annual toy safety report revealed that, despite a new law to overhaul the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), there's still "Trouble in Toyland."



PROTECTING KIDS FROM TOXICS AND UNSAFE TOYS—Shannon Nelson released the "Trouble in Toyland" report, which highlights toy hazards on store shelves, in La Crosse with Sen. Kapanke.

Become An E-Activist

Sign up to receive e-mail alerts and become part of our network of more than 10,000 online activists. Visit www.wispirg.org to sign up.



Sens. Julie Lassa, Dave Hansen, Dan Kapanke, and Lena Taylor, and Reps. Kelda Helen Roys and Jim Soletski joined WISPIRG staff at events across the state highlighting this year's report findings and urging the state to take action on toxics in children's products.

This year, in addition to the findings on choking, noise and toxic hazards, WISPIRG's national federation released an interactive smartphone application, also available online—toysafety.mobi or toysafety.net—to help parents and consumers avoid these hazards.

The mobile site puts toy safety information at consumers' fingertips and enables them to report potential hazards so that we can investigate and follow up with the CPSC. ■

Tax & Budget

Bang For Our Buck

WISPIRG is working with state lawmakers on legislation to ensure that companies that receive

economic development subsidies from the state follow through on the job creation commitments that they promise.

A 2007 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation found 25 big companies that were awarded \$80 million in state subsidies over a six-year period fell about 40 percent short on the job creation they promised to receive those subsidies. Responding to these findings, WISPIRG worked to pass legislation that discloses information regarding economic development subsidies and makes this information publicly available online. The bill gives taxpayers a way of knowing exactly who's getting support from the state coffers.

Building on this victory, new legislation will hold companies accountable for not following through on their job creation commitments by cancelling subsidies or seeking repayment. ■

Toxic-Free Future

U.S. Facilities Will Be Safer, 25 Years After Bhopal

110 million Americans live in the shadow of a catastrophic release of poison gas. In December 1984, Bhopal, India—a city of half a million—experienced such a catastrophe when a chemical gas spill from a pesticide factory created a dense cloud over the city, and 20,000 people lost their lives. And it could happen in Wisconsin.

A November vote in the House of Representatives brought us closer to

protecting the millions of Americans who live and work in the danger zones around chemical facilities.

WISPIRG Public Health Advocate Elizabeth Hitchcock applauded passage of the Chemical and Water Security Act of 2009. "We should not tolerate unnecessary risk to millions of Americans when we know that we can do better," she said.

A senate version of the House bill should be introduced within weeks of the Dec. 3 anniversary of Bhopal. ■

Consumer Protection

Check Scam Law Moving Forward

In October, the state Assembly passed WISPIRG-backed legislation that protects consumers from the misleading practice of sending a check that, when cashed, commits the victim to products or services that they do not intend to purchase.

The "Check Scam Protection Act" will prevent vendors from engaging in this practice.

"Consumers have the right to full disclosure and should never be manipulated. They should not be deceived into purchasing products or services unknowingly or unwillingly," stated WISPIRG's Bruce Speight at a July public hearing on the bill.

The bill now moves to the state Senate for consideration. ■



Be An Advocate For Wisconsin's Future With WISPIRG's Planned Giving Program.

You can be remembered as someone who cared enough to leave a legacy of activism on behalf of Wisconsin consumers and ensure the future health of our state's democracy by making a bequest to WISPIRG.

For information, call: 1-800-841-7299, or e-mail plannedgiving@wispirg.org.

Advancing Transportation Reform In Wisconsin

Without big changes, Wisconsin's transportation system is in trouble. High and wildly fluctuating gas prices add to Wisconsin residents' economic woes, traffic congestion wastes valuable time and energy, and our cars and trucks produce pollution that harms our health and contributes to global warming.

At the same time, we spend millions of taxpayer dollars each year on wasteful transportation projects. This money should go instead to maintenance, modernization and better transportation investments.

"Greasing the Wheels"

There are over 1,200 crumbling bridges in Wisconsin, and 73,000 nationally, but year after year startlingly few federal transportation dollars go to fixing them.

In 2008, for example, just a few months after the tragic Minneapolis bridge collapse which killed 13 and sparked alarm and outrage across the country, Congress directed only 74 of the 704 highway projects earmarked in the transportation appropriations bill to repair or maintain a bridge, tunnel, or overpass.

In November, a new WISPIRG report, "Greasing the Wheels: the Crossroads of Campaign Money and Transportation Policy," found that only about ten percent of the projects and funding focused on fixing the nation's crumbling infrastructure. Most of the \$570 million went for new highways and other new construction.

The report also found that millions of dollars also flowed in another direction... from highway construction companies and the trade associations that represent them to the campaign coffers of elected officials in Madison and Washington, D.C.

"We believe that transportation spending is skewed toward road-widening and new highway projects favored by developers, road builders and the other interests who make those contributions,"

said Johanna Lathrop, WISPIRG Advocate. "We need to clean up the campaign finance system so that lawmakers can focus on the needs of the public rather than their major donors."

Moving Into the 21st Century

In November, the Dane County Board passed a resolution supporting the creation of a Regional Transit Authority (RTA). WISPIRG worked with coalition partners to organize and mobilize hundreds of supporters and move this important resolution forward. An RTA will streamline transportation decision-making and lead to an enhanced, regional transportation system that grows the Dane County region and economy.



Staff

ADVOCATING TRANSPORTATION AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM — WISPIRG Advocate Johanna Lathrop releases "Greasing the Wheels" in Milwaukee.

WISPIRG is also working with state advocates to advance legislation which will enable RTAs in other areas of the state, including southeastern Wisconsin. RTAs will provide regional planning and dedicated funding, empower communities to make decisions about their local transportation systems, and leverage more federal transportation funding for Wisconsin. ■

To Our Members



Dear WISPIRG member,

If it were easy, someone would have done it already—I've heard the president utter this truism time and again in response to calls for speedier action.

I think it certainly applies when our agenda includes reforming the health care system, reining in Wall Street, and transforming our transportation and energy sectors.

Still, I'm not content to wait it out.

When the health care debate seemed to veer completely off-course this summer, WISPIRG called attention to \$3 trillion in potential savings from reform, mobilized the small business community, and organized the doctors and hospitals that are already showing us what reform could help us achieve.

We're also leading a coalition effort to convince Congress to pass legislation that will ensure Wall Street won't be able to continue gambling with our financial security.

And, even while the recession has made it difficult to think about long-term investments, our staff have been building the case for a fundamental reordering of our priorities when it comes to spending on transportation (i.e., put tax dollars toward fixing crumbling roads and bridges, as well as public transportation—not new highway projects).

Because of the progress I've seen, and because of your support, I'm confident we can speed things up.

Sincerely,
Bruce Speight
State Director

WISPIRG Citizen Agenda

This newsletter is published three times a year by the Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group. You can receive the newsletter through your e-mail. Just go to our Web site to sign up.

WISPIRG

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CITIZEN ADVOCATE

VOLUME 23, NO 2

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Financial Privacy & Security

House OKs New Wall Street Rules

Just prior to the holiday recess, the House Financial Services Committee passed a comprehensive package of bills that would set new rules for Wall Street.

The legislation includes a WISPIRG-backed Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA) with the power to prevent dangerous financial products—including certain types of sub-prime loans—from being put on the market.

WISPIRG's Consumer Program Director Ed Mierzwinski testified several times before Congress, advocating the CFPA as part of comprehensive financial reform. During a hearing last year at the beginning of our push, Mierzwinski told the House Financial Services Committee that a CFPA "focused on credit and payment products ... targets the most significant underlying causes of the massive regulatory failures that occurred."

To make the CFPA a reality, Mierzwinski and WISPIRG's Washington D.C. Office Director Gary Kalman are among the leaders of a



JPRF

TARGETING THE UNDERLYING CAUSES—WISPIRG Federal Consumer Program Director Ed Mierzwinski testified before congress advocating strong financial reform.

200-organization-strong coalition that is also fighting for transparency in the \$500 trillion currently traded on so-called "shadow markets," and new rules to ensure that no bank or investment firm is allowed to gamble with taxpayer money.

A companion bill has been introduced in the Senate and we expect final votes in the spring of 2010. ■

WISPIRG's Mission

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, WISPIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. WISPIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, result-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

Citizen Advocate Credits

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Design: Matthew Bartholomew & Public Interest GRFX (215) 985-1113. Printed on recycled paper.