

## Finding Budget ‘High Ground’

**By Mike Owen**

What a pleasure to come to Mason City and see the serious interest in issues facing Iowans and all Americans, including Medicaid, Food Stamps and Social Security.

More than 30 people attended a hearing sponsored Monday (Sept. 19) by the Iowa Citizen Action Network and the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church. The issues are particularly timely — and not just because Hurricane Katrina has shown us very real faces of poverty in America.

They are live issues now in Congress — choices illustrated well by the Mike Keefe cartoon on Monday’s opinion page in the Globe-Gazette: an island for “The Rich” shielded by a wall of “tax cuts,” its occupant unconcerned about the floodwaters of “Iraq debt” and “Katrina Debt” raging past, and President Bush in a boat offering reassurance: “Don’t worry. First thing we do is reinforce the levee.”

Millions of Americans are in poverty every day — even without natural disasters making it worse. In Iowa, a new Census report estimates that 9.9 percent of Iowans are in poverty, and 10.4 percent don’t have health insurance. That’s 1 in 10 Iowans — and that includes working folks. Further, 1 in 11 is food-insecure. And without Social Security, which is threatened for the long-term by privatization schemes, almost half of Iowa seniors would be in poverty.

It was noteworthy in recent days that Sen. Chuck Grassley, who supports repeal of the estate tax, said it was not something to do at this time. He noted, correctly, that it would be “unseemly” to be talking about repeal when so many people are suffering in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Indeed, the image would be awkward. The estate tax is something paid only by the very richest Americans — why some aptly refer to it as the “Paris Hilton tax” — and is largely on income that is otherwise never taxed, contrary to claims of those who support repeal. Cutting the estate tax is unseemly at any time.

Yet, what is Congress considering? Other cuts in taxes for the haves, cuts in safety-net services for the have-nots — and a higher budget deficit. Medicaid cuts and the Food Stamp cuts are just ways to pay for tax cuts we cannot afford. Tax cuts for the wealthy

are a burden placed on all the rest of us and represent a “birth tax” on Americans yet to be born. Somebody’s going to have to pay off the debt we are creating with reckless fiscal policies in Washington.

The folks who gathered Monday night in Mason City clearly grasped these issues. While each came with his or her own concerns and perspectives, the consensus in the room was that (1) tax cuts for the wealthy cannot be justified, (2) safety-net services are important and must not be undermined, and (3) Social Security needs to be protected.

Thank you, Mason City, for showing us the high ground.

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***Mike Owen is assistant director of the Iowa Policy Project, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization based in Mount Vernon. Iowa Policy Project reports are available to the public, free of charge, on the web at [www.iowapolicyproject.org](http://www.iowapolicyproject.org).***