



## News > Local

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### Guthrie answers questions at town hall meeting

[Print Page](#)

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Published: Tuesday, August 31, 2010 12:12 AM CDT

You've heard the stories about the great health care benefits and pensions members of Congress get when they retire.

They're not true -- at least not anymore, U.S. Rep. Brett Guthrie, told a town hall meeting at Western Kentucky University-Owensboro on Monday.

"Members of Congress have to participate in health care, buying it from the exchange like everybody else," the Bowling Green Republican told about 50 people attending the noon meeting.

Congress had its own health care system until the recent health care reform legislation was passed.

Guthrie told the crowd, "I have the same Social Security benefits that you do."

He said if he serves 20 years in Congress, "I would get one-third of my salary" in retirement benefits -- in addition to Social Security.

Members of Congress currently earn \$174,000 a year.

The Owensboro meeting was part of "America Speaking Out," a formal program by House Republicans to see what the public wants them to do in the closing weeks of the current session of Congress.

There's not much time left, Guthrie said. Congress goes back into session on Sept. 14 and takes another break on Oct. 8 until after the November election.

Guthrie told the crowd that in his opinion, "\$4 gas two years ago is what wrecked our economy. We were on the bubble then, but this (gas prices) is what pricked the bubble."

On immigration reform, he said, "I think we have to secure our borders before we reform immigration."

It's hard to find a good solution to the problem, Guthrie said. "These are real families and real people," he said.

In some cases, children have grown up in the United States without documentation and have no ties to the countries their parents came from, he said.

Guthrie steered away from political statements because the meeting was on state property.

"If you want to talk politics, we can talk later off Western's campus," he told the crowd.

Many of the questions dealt with health care reform.

Al Mattingly, owner of Acme Plumbing & Heating Co. and the Republican nominee for Daviess Judge -Executive, asked what kind of health care employees would receive if companies dropped coverage after health care reform fully takes effect in 2014.

"Until the health commissioner is appointed, there's no way to know," Guthrie said.

He said 86 percent of Americans now have health insurance.

"They're dissatisfied with how much they pay," Guthrie said. But he said there is no guarantee that costs won't go up under the recently passed health care legislation.

He said he's opposed to term limits because small states such as Kentucky would lose clout to larger states with more members of Congress. Seniority levels the playing field, Guthrie said.

Another problem, he said, is that professional staff members "become more important than elected officials" if elected officials are only in Washington for a short time.

To a question about what it's going to take to get businesses to hire again, Guthrie said, most "are looking for stability."

The federal government, he said, has put a lot of money into banks. But banks are leery of making bad loans, so they're buying government debt instead of lending money to businesses, Guthrie said.

Congress needs to abolish the estate tax, he said.

It was being phased out by the Bush administration. But it is scheduled to be revived in 2011 at a rate of 55 percent on assets of more than \$1 million, he said.

The average Kentucky farm "is worth \$2.3 million," Guthrie said.

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