

Surrounded by earlier generations of warplanes, more than 700 Chamber of Commerce members spent Wednesday morning defending what many of them view as an attack: growing government control of America's free-enterprise system.

The Strategic Air & Space Museum, about halfway between the state's two largest cities, was the site for a five-hour "fly-back" meeting, billed as a recession-friendly alternative to the usual "fly-ins" to Washington to meet with federal officials.

It was the first such event sponsored by the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and the chambers in Omaha, Lincoln and Bellevue, and it drew several times as many people as the annual trips to D.C.

At \$99 a person, it was a fraction of the cost of a trip to Washington. Chamber leaders said they may repeat the event.

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Titled "Bringing D.C. Home," the meeting's mission found allies in Sens. Ben Nelson and Mike Johanns and Reps. Lee Terry, Jeff Fortenberry and Adrian Smith, who agreed with virtually every questioner.

The four Republicans and Nelson, a Democrat, said they are working together on the issues, including the most contentious proposals: health care reform, environmental law changes known as cap-and-trade and "card-check," which would alter the way workers organize unions.

Each spoke to the entire group during the first part of the day, re-creating the "Nebraska Breakfast" they host every week at the Capitol when Congress is in session.

Then during breakout sessions, each hosted a smaller session that dealt with a range of topics: shifting contractors' work to Defense Department employees; the impact of Medicare cuts on nursing homes; assistance to livestock producers whose animals are killed in disasters; new regulations of the financial industry.

But most of the attention went to health care and cap-and-trade, issues that Johanns said could affect citizens directly and change the free-enterprise system.

"Health care is an issue that generates passions," Nelson said. He said he hoped that senators would reach a compromise that would have wide political support.

A key sticking point in the proposal is whether the government should start a federal health care program. Supporters say such a plan would compete with private insurers and keep them honest; opponents say it would drive private insurers out of business and hurt benefits.

Johanns said that a government-run plan probably would not pay hospitals and other medical providers enough to stay in business, endangering health care in many communities in the state.

Terry said a recent letter written by Rep. Henry A. Waxman, D-Calif., which he said demanded financial data and other information from insurance companies, is a sign that a government-run health plan would have an unfair advantage.

Fortenberry said the health care proposals so far would not reduce costs, improve the quality of care, encourage prevention of illness or spur medical advances -- all vital to any health care system.

Smith said cap-and-trade legislation would let government "skew the marketplace" by increasing energy costs, yet its supporters call the proposal "market-based."

Each said that Congress should not rush.

Lincoln businessman Robert Milligan, chairman of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, introduced the meeting's keynote speaker, Tom Donohue, president and CEO of the Washington-based national chamber.

"The business of America is business," Milligan said. "We are the envy of the world, so let's not screw it up."

Donohue said the U.S. Chamber soon will start an intense public information campaign to defend the free-enterprise system, saying proposals now in Congress would "radically alter how we do business."

New taxes, new regulations and new bureaucracies would alter the nation's reliance on hard work, individual responsibility, the profit incentive and other bedrocks of the nation's economic system, he said.

He said air quality and other environmental issues are global problems that can't be solved by laws that would put American business at a disadvantage.

Donohue said a public health care program would wipe out the current insurance system, rather than compete fairly.

As for the card-check proposal. "No compromises. None. Forget it."

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