



35th COACT Farm Picnic celebrates family farms and small businesses as pillars of our economy

Small Business Minnesota confirms COACT's stand for health care reform

For many of COACT's 35 years of Farm Picnic visits to supporting business owners, they've been telling us that unaffordable medical coverage is their number one problem, which was confirmed at the 35th COACT Farm Picnic Sunday, August 16, at the Central Minnesota farm community of Pierz.

Because the Farm Picnic annually celebrates main street businesses and family farms as the pillars of our state's economy, it was appropriate that the featured speaker was Audrey Britton, chair of Small Business Minnesota, said COACT Pres. Sister Ruth Lentner. Co-sponsor was Morrison County Farmers Union.

As a business owner, Britton told the audience of 105 guests what COACT has been hearing for years from owners on Central Minnesota's main streets: paying HMOs for medical care is not cost effective, public accountability is needed for tax dollars going to HMO contractors, and high deductible policies are unaffordable. Business owners must be cost-efficient managers, so they expect the same from the HMOs.



Audrey Britton, chair of Small Business Minnesota, addresses costly health insurance as small businesses' biggest problem.

Small businesses reflect our concerns

Ninety-eight percent of Minnesota's businesses are small businesses and family farms which create two of every three jobs, she said, so their concerns reflect ours. And like most everyone else, high cost medical coverage is small businesses' number one problem.

Although Small Business Minnesota (SBM) is not recommending one solution over another at this time, it expects legislators to deploy expertise to solve the health care crisis. According to SBM, this means *standardizing and controlling administrative and overhead costs* as in Canada, Germany, and every other industrialized country which, unlike the U.S., are efficiently managing costs, not wasting our premium dollars on profits, perks, marketing, and lobbying.

Small businesses and farms are not represented by the large corporations

The voice of small businesses and family farms for cost efficient and affordable health care has been hijacked by large corporations and the U.S health insurance industry, which is the world's most profitable, said SBM's Britton. Rather than working with SBM to help make the Affordable Care Act and MNSure exchange work better for small businesses, farms, and employees, the National Federation of Businesses and Minnesota Chamber of Commerce lobbies with the health insurance industry and corporate America, not Main Street.



Thom Petersen, MN Farmers Union government relations director, and SBM's Audrey Britton represent the two pillars of our economy for efficient, affordable, accountable health care delivery

SBM recommends looking at other countries' health care delivery systems

While referring to affordable health care as a fundamental right in other countries, SBM says it is vital for the survival and prosperity of Minnesota's small businesses and family farms.

Therefore, SBM recommends that policy makers look at the successful health care delivery systems of other countries. Interestingly, these countries deliver health care entirely through private doctors, hospitals, and clinics, similar to those U.S. providers who remain private as they are paid by Medicare. These single-payer systems are *social insurance* systems, not *socialized medicine*, according to Princeton health economist Uwe Reinhardt cited by SBM.

High-cost health care puts U.S. economy at risk

The bottom line, according to SBM, is that the U.S. is spending more on health care than any other country. This puts the economy at serious economic risk. Economists cited by SBM argue that disproportionate spending on one segment of the economy limits the growth potential of other diverse segments. Spending one of every six dollars of our GDP on health care (18% GDP) is bad business.

Feedlot industry retaliates against Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Citizens Board for its environmental review of mega-dairy

COACT opposes legislation to silence citizens' decision-making voice of 48 years

Following the MPCA Citizens Board ordering an environmental review for the largest corporate dairy expansion in state history, the feedlot industry and their legislative allies retaliated with legislation this session to first silence the Board and then eliminate it.

Language to eliminate the Board did not pass the House or Senate, but was adopted by the Conference Committee for the **Environment Budget Bill** the last day of the session. The language replaced an earlier bill to remove the Board's environmental review authority, but without eliminating the Board.

The industry's retaliation was triggered last August by the Citizens Board's ordering a rigorous Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) prior to permitting expansion of the state's largest dairy corporation, Riverview LLP, in Stevens County, western Minnesota. During its 48 years the Board has rarely ordered an EIS, but in this case the need was overwhelming.

Testimony from citizens and COACT convinced the Board to require the EIS in order to see how Riverview's proposed 9200-cow expansion, largest so far, could potentially damage the area's environment and economy.

Riverview already owns six operations averaging 4,000 cows each, with the largest over 6,000, for a total of 27,000 cows concentrated in one area. Adding 9,200 more would produce manure waste beyond the tolerance of the county's water supply and acreage.

Air and water pollution would risk public health, according to COACT's testimony. Furthermore, COACT asked if the public will be responsible for the ensuing pollution costs of expansion, since Riverview is a Limited Liability Partnership.

Calls for Board's destruction began at Nov. 12 meeting of the Senate Rural Task Force

Rather than comply with the EIS for the good of the environment and community, Riverview along with Minnesota's largest agri-corporations and their legislative allies sought early on to destroy the Citizens Board for doing its job.

Cries of **over** regulation ruining the state's business climate+by driving out Riverview Dairy arose from agri-industry Senators at a Nov. 12 meeting of the Senate Rural Task Force where they dismissed family farms as **not** real ag+compared to the **real** ag+of mega-cow operations. They then declared their aggressive pursuit of legislation to overhaul the Board and feedlot permitting laws in the upcoming session.

In quick response, COACT alerted members to call the Chair and their Senators on the Task Force to protect the Citizens Board's EIS authority. The Dec. 8 meeting heard no anti-Board proposals from the ag-industry Senators. However, following pre-session rumblings against the Board in the media, clamor arose in the House in March from ag-industry House Members for legislation to begin its destruction.

To prepare for the legislative assault, COACT united with the Land Stewardship Project and other groups at a January 29 Senate Environment Committee hearing to stand up for environmental review. Knowing the need for public understanding of the Board's importance, Sen. John Marty, Chairman, invited former MPCA Commissioner Grant Merritt to relate its history of citizen participation to help it make sound decisions.



COACT Vice President (far right) and other members rally with Sen. John Marty at the MPCA June 23 to save the Citizens Board.

To continue building citizen opposition to the House's killing legislation, COACT alerted the public at town hall meetings of Sen. Marty and Sen. Richard Cohen, Finance Committee Chair, and over an action alert network with citizen leaders in Central Minnesota.

The Citizens Board's special connection to the region was published in an April op-ed on the MPCA's creator, Senator Gordon Rosenmeier, in the *Brainerd Dispatch* by COACT and the Brainerd Lakes Area League of Women Voters. The revered conservative legislator and conservationist authored the MPCA legislation in 1967.

COACT is working with the Rosenmeier Center for State and Local Government to conduct a Rosenmeier Forum on the MPCA and similar corporate power that necessitated its creation 48 years ago.

Following a rally at the Governor's Mansion May 21, Gov. Dayton vetoed elimination of the Citizens Board on May 23. He then used his executive power to make it an advisory committee to the Commissioner until its EIS authority can be re-legislated in the 2017 session.