





Sen. makes stops at college, community pantry, veterans cemetery

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., stopped in Gallup April 2 to announce the Degrees Not Debt Act and to support the construction of the Gallup Veterans Cemetery.

During his visit, he spoke to fellow democrats at the Jim Harlin Community Pantry about his bid for re-election to the U.S. Senate.

Heinrich said voters of the region should cast their ballots for him because he knows this part of the state and because he cares about the area and is willing to fight for it.

“We work on issues here all the time that are near and dear to my heart and the community,” he said.

Heinrich pointed to initiatives like the community-based outpatient clinic for veterans in Gallup, and a new Indian Health Services hospital.

He also mentioned his commitment to outdoor recreation availability in the area.

“I worked with a number of folks from Gallup on the trail project in the Zuni Mountains that brings new economic activities here,” he said.

Heinrich was the former director of the Cottonwood Gulch Foundation in Thoreau and said he spent many evenings and weekends in Gallup shopping.

The senator said it was growing up in a working class family that led him to embrace Democratic Party values.

“My dad never got a college degree and my mom never finished high school,” he said. “They were able to create a very bright future by simply working hard and playing by the rules.”

The current political climate in the country right now precludes some people from playing by the rules while enjoying benefits and incentives that are not available to all American citizens, he added.

“We can hit the reset button in this election,” Heinrich said. “We can invest in our own again.”

Heinrich announced the Degrees Not Debt Act April 2 at Middle College High School, which is located on the UNM-Gallup campus.

The act would focus on the Pell Grant, a need-based federal grant program that began in 1972.

Under the Degrees Not Debt Act, the Pell Grant would be increased to $10,000 per year and index future Pell Grants to the consumer price index, lower expected family contribution, hold states accountable to higher education funding appropriations, and increase transparency in college costs.

Bolstering education will stimulate the economy, Heinrich said of the initiative.

“We were at (Middle College High School) today announcing new legislation to modernize the Pell Grant and bring it up to a level where it should be so that our youth can go to college without graduating with a mountain of debt,” he said.

He said education is the great equalizer, which levels the playing field economically. Investing a portion of the state permanent fund toward early childhood education is one possible solution.

Heinrich cited the $1.7 trillion tax bill that provided tax cuts in the form of corporate buy backs and tax cuts for high income earners as an example of misused resources.

There were many other ways the $1.7 trillion could have been spent, Heinrich said, especially considering student debt could have been eliminated.

“We have $1.4 trillion in student debt today that could have been wiped out. Think about how that could have cascaded down the economy,” he said.

The past year-and-a-half has shown that congress and the president are only interested in taking away the American peoples’ tax care and passing the tax cuts, Heinrich told the crowd.

Heinrich did give credit to the Republicans who were willing to cross the aisle and vote for healthcare and saving the Medicaid expansion in N.M. that keeps rural hospitals open.

“These things are the foundation of not only health care, but also our local economies,” he said.

One constituent asked about the status of the Indian hospital that was approved for funding years ago.

“We’re still on track for FY 2020 for the initial $33 million,” Heinrich said. “We’re basically in line behind the one they’re working on in Arizona.”

As a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Heinrich has also been sitting in on the hearings regarding Russian interference in American elections.

“We’re the last game in town,” he said. “The House Intelligence Committee has been completely melted down and has become bifurcated. We are still moving forward.”

The first interim findings dealing with election infrastructure were released and revealed weaknesses the committee is working to address.

Commending the work of New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, Heinrich said her random auditing of precincts, comparing the electronic and paper voting records should be employed across the country.

“That’s the kind of thing that we ought to be encouraging everywhere,” he said.

COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Lucia Kerele of Gallup High School asked about the economy.

“Earlier, you said you wanted to make sure we had one economy, but you didn’t mention how you wanted to do that,” Kerele said.

Heinrich again pointed to his focus on bolstering access to higher education.

“It starts with education, pure and simple,” he answered. “If you don’t make sure that education is accessible to people, no matter what their income level or zip code, you’re never going to bridge that gap.”

Local attorney Barry Klopfer asked about individual rights with regard to privacy.

“Do you support declassification of the ‘Race Paper?’” Klopfer asked. “There’s this influx right now of Homeland Security and the FBI of surveilling and monitoring black activists. Back in the day, we had groups like the Church Commission to protect us from domestic overreach of spying on U.S. citizens.”

Heinrich said the Senate Intelligence Committee has ongoing government oversight on the kinds of surveillance done domestically and throughout the intelligence community.

Angela Barney-Nez said she was seeking the senator's support for Indian education.

"The early childhood funding has been completely wiped out in the FY 2019 proposal in the Green Book now. Johnson-O'Malley has been completely wiped out. There's about $160 million that has been wiped out from Indian education," Barney-Nez said.

The Johnson-O'Malley Act is a federal subsidy covering education and medical services to benefit Native Americans.

"This is something that Sen. (Tom) Udall and I have been following very closely," Heinrich said in response. "We've seen a pattern of this administration of under-funding and even de-funding these programs. We're going to continue to make sure that the Appropriations Committee does a better job of funding those priorities than what has come to us from the White House."

By Rick Abasta
For the Sun