

2015: The Year in Review and a Look Ahead

Congressman Fred Upton

114th Congress | First Session



Introduction

2015 was a year of innovation and growth here in Southwest Michigan, and across the country. Whether in Washington, D.C., or back home, my team and I remained ever-focused on common-sense, bipartisan solutions to problems big and small, while staying in touch with residents of the Sixth District in person and online.

Using cutting edge social media tools like [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Medium](#), [Twitter](#), and [Snapchat](#) to help interact with constituents has put Congress closer to the communities we serve more than ever. Working together and listening to folks in Southwest Michigan, we are able to bring about real, positive change for our area.

The purpose of this report is to educate any interested parties about how we went about tackling the big issues, and how we can keep these priorities on the front burner as we look ahead to an ambitious 2016 agenda. Our work continues.

Our Southwest Michigan Community

Southwest Michigan has been my home for some 60 years now. It's an honor to represent a diverse section of the state that stretches from the shores of Lake Michigan to the eastern edge of Kalamazoo County. The Sixth Congressional District is home to key industries that range from agriculture to auto parts manufacturing to high-tech biomedical innovation centers and everything in between. As your Representative, it's important to me and my office to hear from leaders in the community on issues that are important and affect families, businesses, and other stakeholders. In that vein, we've consistently focused on areas of common ground and how we can bring folks together. That focus on building and supporting our Southwest Michigan community will continue in 2016.

Like many in our community, I [spent the fall cheering on the Benton Harbor High School Tiger football team](#) and our sports teams at colleges like Western Michigan University.

My office hosted a [Congressional Art Competition](#), and made [appointments to national military service academies](#) for local students. We [honored](#) a Van Buren County Sheriff's Deputy, and helped spread [holiday cheer](#) to our military men and women overseas.

We also worked to give local stakeholders a voice in Washington, D.C., on issues including the [environment](#), drug abuse, and [healthcare innovation](#), and we remembered giants of our community that passed away in 2015 such as State Senator [Harry Gast](#), State Representative [Neil Nitz](#), and former Western Michigan University President [Elson Floyd](#).

Being a local community leader is about trust, accountability, and reliability. My two offices in St. Joseph/Benton Harbor and in Kalamazoo are always open to try to assist constituents however possible.

Jobs and the Economy Here in Southwest Michigan

Jobs and the economy continue to be my number one priority for Southwest Michigan. While our economy is improving under Governor Snyder's leadership, more can and should be done to make sure everyone here has equal opportunities to find and hold onto a quality job. Southwest Michigan is a hub for commerce and innovation, and when our residents are empowered to succeed, we all thrive. 2016 will be a time of even more innovation and change. We all should be doing everything we can to ensure Southwest Michigan stays at the forefront of the 21st Century global economy.

In December, the House passed the *Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes (PATH) Act* which permanently renews vital tax credits. Providing tax certainty to our local small business owners will help create good-paying local jobs and boost our economy.

In October, I joined the majority of my House colleagues in advancing [H.R. 1314, the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015](#). This budget deal brings certainty to our local economy and is good for our seniors, military, and taxpayers.

Also in October, [the House voted to reauthorize the Export-Import Bank](#). The bank serves as a critical investment agency for Southwest Michigan: It currently supports 15 Southwest Michigan companies and nearly 500 local jobs. It also supports nearly 60,000 jobs throughout the state. By making commonsense reforms to the bank as part of the reauthorization, we made it more effective and efficient.

In January, the House [passed legislation that would protect the nation's most-vulnerable workers by restoring the definition of "full-time" work to 40 hours per week](#). The legislation would repeal a provision of the president's health care law that changed the definition of "full-time" to 30 hours per week. Our commonsense, bipartisan legislation helps workers by increasing the hours they can work to earn a living and increasing their take home pay.

Healthcare Innovation: 21st Century Cures

I have long pushed for a greater emphasis on biomedical research and to improve the public health. Beginning in 2014, I partnered with Congresswoman Diana DeGette, D-Colorado, on the 21st Century Cures initiative. This legislative aims to help patients and their families by speeding up the discovery, development, and delivery of life-saving cures – all in a safe and effective way. Our work on "Cures" continues into 2016 as we maintain our work with stakeholders in order to get legislation signed into law by the president.

In April, DeGette visited Southwest Michigan with me to meet with patient groups, innovators, community leaders, and students at the Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine. The trip, dubbed [#CuresInTheMitten](#), was invaluable in sharing our

perspective and gaining meaningful feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders, including researchers and students at our local university.

Most importantly, in July, after more than a year of bipartisan work, stakeholder feedback, hearings, and bipartisan roundtables, we delivered a big win for patients and their families when the House passed H.R. 6, the *21st Century Cures Act*, by an [overwhelming 344-77 vote](#).

Aiding Our Veterans and Their Families

Nothing is more sacred than honoring our pledge to attend to veterans and their families following their service. We owe our nation's bravest a great debt for their tremendous sacrifice and I take very seriously my duty to those who have served, and have a strong record of supporting our veterans and their families. With U.S. troops defending our nation while stationed around the world, it is more important than ever that we focus on providing our soldiers and their families the resources they've earned both on the battlefield, and here at home. As we look ahead to 2016, we can do more to aid our veterans and their families including advancing bipartisan Veterans Affairs reforms.

In November, the House advanced a [package of four bills](#) that made it easier for veterans to get jobs, own small businesses, and help their families. In May, the House advanced a [package of six bills](#) designed to help veterans and their families in transitioning from military to civilian life, including timely VA reforms.

It is also one of my greatest honors to be able to present veterans and their families overdue medals. Just this year I awarded service medals to the sisters of [Jay Martine](#) in a surprise ceremony in Benton Harbor, [Dennis Jokela](#) of Kalamazoo, and [Robert M. Goldacker](#) of Portage.

I was also proud to participate in a [Talons Out Honor Flight](#) to Washington, D.C., in October to celebrate World War II veterans visiting their memorial in our Nation's Capital for the first time.

Keeping our Homeland Safe

In the current climate of international terrorism, no mistakes can be made and America's top foreign policy goal must be to defend our citizens and our homeland from terrorist threats. Combating terrorism and preventing future attacks remain national priorities. I have always voted to ensure the brave men and women of our Armed Forces have the resource and training necessary to succeed on and off the battlefield. In 2016, we should focus on finding common ground for keeping our homeland safe.

The big news this December was the announcement that the Michigan Air National Guard's 110th Attack Wing, stationed in Battle Creek, will be host to a [new Cyber Operation Squadron distinction](#). I joined forces with U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, and authored a [letter](#) to the Pentagon in support of bedding down this cyber mission at Battle Creek Air Base. The

entire Michigan Congressional Delegation signed our letter of support, touting the unique capabilities and infrastructure that Battle Creek has to offer. Additionally, we wanted to draw attention to our first-class cyber training programs at Michigan universities, and the growing cyber security industry in our state that stands ready to support the new squadron in protecting our nation's cyber networks. The new Cyber Squadron puts Southwest Michigan on the front lines of protecting our nation against the ever-evolving threat of cyber attacks.

Following the strong support here in Washington, D.C., I helped lead the first-ever Michigan Congressional Delegation tour of Michigan defense sites in September. We saw the Selfridge A-10 fighter mission up close, the workshops and testing facilities at TACOM and TARDEC, troop training at Camp Grayling, and the expansive base at Fort Custer – which is currently competing for a \$3.5 billion East Coast Missile Defense site. Members of our delegation had the opportunity to meet with Michigan National Guard leadership and get a first-hand account of how our state supports the defense of our nation and equips soldiers around the globe.

In 2016, I plan on continuing to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to secure [Fort Custer](#) as a Pentagon-approved missile defense site.

In November, I supported the passage of the bipartisan [National Defense Authorization Act](#), which was signed into law by President Obama, and gives our men and women in the military the tools they need to do their jobs. It also requires President Obama to come up with a plan to take on the very real threat of terrorist groups like ISIS and denies the president funds to close Guantanamo Bay.

Additionally, whether it is holding the Obama administration [accountable](#) for its nuclear deal with Iran, ensuring our [refugee program](#) does not needlessly put our country at risk for terrorism, strengthening our [Visa Waiver Program](#) for that same reason, or working to combat international [human trafficking](#), I remain committed to working in a bipartisan way to strengthen and improve our national security.

Advancing Education Opportunities

A proper education is the bedrock of our democracy, and I understand the importance of ensuring our youngest citizens receive a quality education. A well-educated workforce means a stronger and more stable economy and is necessary for success in today's world. One of my greatest pleasures as a Representative is hearing from and speaking to students around Southwest Michigan. In 2016, education issues such making reforms to our higher education system and working to make it easier for families to afford higher education will continue to be a top priority.

In December, the House [passed major education reform legislation](#) – the *Every Student Succeeds Act* – which will replace the outdated *No Child Left Behind* legislation with commonsense,

bipartisan reforms. Among the reforms, the legislation signed into law by President Obama will reduce the federal role in K-12 education to give more flexibility to local and state officials as well as provide individual school districts with more funding flexibility. It also removes the high stakes federal consequences for annual assessments and empowers parents by providing more information about local school performances. It was the first real education reform enacted since 2002.

In February, the House passed another commonsense education bill that would expand and strengthen [529 college savings plans](#) – specifically designed to help middle-class families struggling with student-loan debt burdens.

Protecting our Great Lakes

Growing up on the shores of Lake Michigan has instilled in me a deep appreciation for its natural beauty and I understand the need to preserve all of the Great Lakes for future generations. Our Great Lakes really are the lifeline of Southwest Michigan, and communities across the Midwest region. As an active member of the Congressional Great Lakes Caucus, I have an extensive record of working in a bipartisan manner to protect the Great Lakes watershed and all it provides, including recreation, tourism, and business, for future generations to enjoy. In 2016, I plan on continuing our aggressive oversight of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

In December, I helped usher a bipartisan piece of legislation through Congress that would ban synthetic plastic [microbeads](#). In late December, President Obama [signed our bill into law](#). Microbeads are tiny scrubbers found in cleansers, body scrubs, and toothpaste. While nearly invisible, smaller than a pinhead, microbeads cause big problems once they are flushed down the drain. Because they are so small, microbeads easily flow through water filtration systems and end up in bodies of water, including the Great Lakes. This is why we worked so hard to #BanTheBead.

Additionally, the House has been on the front lines of working to protect our Great Lakes [drinking water](#), stopping the spread of [Asian Carp](#), examining [pipeline safety](#), and working to authorize the [Great Lakes Restoration Initiative](#).

Defending Medicare and Medicaid for the Most Vulnerable

Seniors and our most vulnerable in Southwest Michigan and across the country deserve a safety net that is strong and protects them. They also deserve peace of mind that Medicare and Medicaid will be there for them – and for future generations. The Energy and Commerce Committee has been at the forefront of working in a bipartisan way to strengthen both Medicare and Medicaid – and that effort will continue into 2016 and beyond.

In March, I was proud to help broker a “[major breakthrough](#)” bipartisan deal to strengthen Medicare for our seniors. The Medicare Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR) budget gimmick has threatened seniors’ access to health care through the years and led to 17 temporary patches during nearly two decades at a cost of \$170 billion. H.R. 2, the *Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act*, which was signed into law by the president, permanently fixes the Medicare payment formula, protects seniors’ access to their physicians, and builds upon the foundation the Energy and Commerce Committee established in 2014. Without passage of this important legislation, many doctors would simply refuse to see Medicare patients.

As part of the *Bipartisan Budget Deal*, we also voted to protect Medicare Part B premiums from rising costs, and gave patients peace of mind they can continue to access the most affordable and accessible treatment close to home.

Additionally, in November, I announced the creation of a [Medicaid Task Force](#) at the Energy and Commerce Committee that will work to strengthen and sustain the critical program for our most vulnerable.

Securing the Backbone of our Economy: Southwest Michigan Agriculture

Agriculture has always had strong roots in Southwest Michigan, where our farmers produce everything from asparagus to zucchini. In 2015, I visited farms in all six counties of the Sixth District, and in listening to our farmers it only reaffirmed that agriculture remains a driving force in our local and state economy. In 2016, I will continue to work with stakeholders to ensure local voices are heard so our agriculture community will continue to produce and thrive.

The biggest concern I heard from farmers in the Sixth District this year was about the proposed Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Waters of the U.S. (WOTUS) rule. We all want clean water, but this onerous rule would have dire consequences for our Southwest Michigan farmers, our economy, and for local jobs. In May, the [House passed a bipartisan bill](#) that would stop this rule, protect our farmers, and give local stakeholders a renewed voice in how to move forward.

In October, a Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit issued a nationwide stay to [block the enforcement](#) of the rule.

Ensuring Affordable Energy for Southwest Michigan Families and Businesses

I’ve long supported a truly “all of the above” energy approach that focuses on emerging clean energy technologies like renewables – solar, wind, and hydropower – as well as traditional energy solutions – safe nuclear, coal, oil, and natural gas – that keep costs low for Southwest Michigan families and businesses. As Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, I understand firsthand how an “all of the above” approach, mixed with commonsense updating of our outdated energy laws, will spur job creation and economic growth as well as keep prices

affordable for everyone. In 2016, we plan on continuing our push to modernize our energy laws that will benefit Southwest Michigan and the entire country.

H.R. 8, the *North American Energy Security and Infrastructure Act*, was a product of more than a year of thoughtful work by the Energy and Commerce Committee. This landmark legislation aims to update our energy laws to maximize our energy potential and includes four main pillars: modernizing our energy infrastructure, protecting our electricity system, strengthening our energy security and diplomacy, and improving energy efficiency and government accountability. It was [advanced by the House in December](#) by a bipartisan vote.

In August, U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-West Virginia, joined me in touring [Cook Power Plant](#) so we could learn more about Cook's safe nuclear operation and hold discussions about energy supply reliability.

Also in August, I joined U.S. Representative Jackie Walorski, R-Indiana, in [demanding answers from British Petroleum](#) about a sharp spike in gas prices that posed a serious hardship for those in both our districts following a problem with its production facility in Indiana.

Combating Prescription Drug and Heroin Abuse

Nearly every 12 minutes, someone dies of a drug overdose in the United States. Addiction to drugs like Vicodin, OxyContin, and Percocet often progresses to heroin abuse because it is cheaper and more commonly available than prescription products. The growing number of deaths and injuries is alarming. During this past year, the Energy and Commerce Committee has held numerous hearings with experts, stakeholders, law enforcement, individuals in recovery, and family members of opioid abusers to identify problems with how this terrible addiction is treated and ways we can help those who need it. This focus on how the federal government can work with local stakeholders to stem the tide of abuse and addiction will certainly continue in 2016.

In addition to our [bipartisan hearing series](#) at the Energy and Commerce Committee, in August, I [spoke](#) at St. Joseph High School at a Prescription Drug and Heroin Conference which provided an important dialogue with local and state leaders on how we can work to end this epidemic.

In February, I invited Cass County Prosecutor Victor Fitz to [testify](#) before an Energy and Commerce subcommittee hearing on prescription drug and heroin abuse.

Making Essential Investments in Southwest Michigan Infrastructure

Roads and infrastructure are the foundation of our Southwest Michigan community. We focused this year on providing certainty for our local and state infrastructure needs. Whether it's US-131 or I-94, we should be continually evaluating our infrastructure requirements and doing what is

best for our community. Because of the groundwork we laid in 2015, 2016 will be a year of building for Southwest Michigan's critical infrastructure needs.

As a conferee to the landmark highway bill that [passed in December](#), and was signed into law by President Obama, we scored a big win for Southwest Michigan drivers, businesses, and families. A five-year authorization gives us certainty we desperately need in our local infrastructure projects and the legislation is fully paid for which means we don't add a dime to our deficit. The highway bill reforms and strengthens surface transportation infrastructure and provides much needed flexibility for state and local governments so they can better address their own unique infrastructure priorities.

Additionally, the highway bill focused on important [auto safety provisions](#) that have been a priority of mine since I authored the TREAD Act in 2000, which was in response to the tragic Ford-Firestone mess when Ford Explorers with Firestone tires rolled over and killed more than 200 people.

Furthermore, in March, the House advanced the [Passenger Rail Reform and Investment Act](#), which would make meaningful reforms to Amtrak to increase transparency and accountability by leveraging private sector resources.

Broadband Internet Infrastructure for the 21st Century

In the 21st Century, Internet broadband infrastructure must be reliable and secure for everyone here in Southwest Michigan. Whether students in Kalamazoo, farmers in Berrien County, or any small business throughout Southwest Michigan, broadband Internet transforms the way we stay connected, learn, get information, and go about our daily lives. In 2016, we'll continue to put the pedal to the metal to improve government permitting for broadband networks so that Southwest Michigan's communications networks continue to thrive and contribute to our success in the global economy.

The Energy and Commerce Committee in October reviewed [six bipartisan proposals](#) aimed specifically at improving broadband deployment meant for consumers across the country. Included in this package is legislation known as "Dig-Once" which would require any highway construction project receiving federal dollars to include conduits for broadband access.

As we look to 2016, we'll continue to have an eye on Internet accessibility issues so that every part of our community has access to Internet connectivity.

Conclusion

As this report highlights, 2015 was a productive year to be sure, and our focus in 2016 will continue to be on improving our Southwest Michigan economy, working to create good-paying, local jobs, and a myriad of other issues that affect families and businesses. As 2016 gets

underway, my pledge to Southwest Michigan is that my office will continue to focus on how we can advance bipartisan solutions and to get the job done for you.

You can learn more about my work at my [website](#), or on my social media accounts: [Facebook](#), [Medium](#), [Instagram](#), [Snapchat](#), [Twitter](#). And you can sign up for my weekly email updates [here](#).