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Taking the Pulse of the Nation's Leaders

by Sean D. Shields

Things have really gotten bad in our nation's capital. Back in November, a bunch of Congressmen were seen publicly slinging mud, attacking law enforcement officers, and causing physical harm to themselves and others. Not surprised?

You might be surprised to discover that the scene described above is in reference to the annual "Longest Yard" Fall Classic football game played between members of Congress and the Capitol Police to raise money for the memorial fund benefiting the families of law enforcement officers who serve to protect our nation's Capitol. Played in a torrential downpour, the game was apparently so rough that U.S. Representative Bill Shuster (R-PA) sustained a head injury that required stitches.

It is not surprising that the final score of this game involving members of Congress was 14-14. Stalemate. No winners and no losers. Judging by how evenly divided the American electorate has been for nearly the last decade, this appears to be the way citizens want their government to function: a no-win, no-lose style of lawmaking.

Case in point is the last quarter of 2005. Even though the Republican party held a rare triumvirate control over the White House, Senate and House of Representatives, a stalemate still prevailed on key provisions in federal spending bills. Why? The reasons are akin to a "perfect storm," the likes of which the Bush Administration hoped would never occur. In the last few months of 2005, our nation endured some of its worst natural disasters and vitriol in political discourse during the modern era. Not a good combination.

While the nation's economy appears to finally be heading in a steady and positive direction, the damage inflicted by hurricanes Rita and Katrina on the Gulf Coast brought the need for government involvement into sharp focus. The call for large federal aid packages to help in the rebuilding process eroded considerable support for much of the Administration's tax reform efforts.

Many other external events have also disrupted the priorities of the Bush Administration and Congressional GOP leadership on permanent tax cuts, immigration system reform, health care reform, and fixes to social security and Medicaid. Making progress on some of the issues during the election year of 2006 will be an even more difficult task.

What does this all mean for you and your business this year? One, some form of immigration reform is going to happen. The system is broken, and virtually everyone in Congress acknowledges it. The difference in enacting reform in 2006 instead of 2005 is that the outcome will likely be much less significant overall, yet it will focus primarily on "securing the borders" because this is an issue with which incumbents can win elections.

This may easily include an initial heavy-handed approach toward identifying and deporting illegal immigrants. Without a viable guest-worker program in place, this could have a seriously detrimental effect not only on

your business, but on the economy. Our industry should approach this issue embracing change, pushing for a more fair and efficient reporting system, while simultaneously ensuring either some form of amnesty or guest-worker visa program to enable current workers to stay at their jobs.

The regulatory and tax burden placed on small business owners must also be addressed. The fact that small businesses are the workhorses of our nation's economy is not lost on most members of Congress. Even though recent reports by the Office of Management & Budget (OMB) indicated a decrease in the growing cost of federal regulations on small business, there is considerably more work to be done. In addition, helping small business creates another strong pillar on which incumbents can run.

Solutions will likely include further efforts to streamline various reporting requirements, and improve agency flexibility and responsiveness to small businesses striving to compete in an increasingly more global marketplace. They will also likely include further tax reforms regarding business property, capital expenses and investments. Our industry should continue to support any efforts to reduce the cost of federal regulation or ease the tax burden on businesses. This will allow those funds to be more effectively invested in further growth and employment, generating greater economic activity.

Finally, the health care system and associated insurance costs will need to be addressed. With over 20 million working adults unable to obtain or afford health insurance, and between one-fourth and one-half of all uninsured adults unable to see a doctor when needed because of the prohibitive costs, members of Congress know this is a hot-button election issue.

Solutions will likely help business owners to afford and offer health insurance plans and/or plans that provide greater coverage for their employees. Our industry needs to have a strong voice in support of creative solutions like association health plans (AHPs), which allow small business owners the ability to pool together and take advantage of the same regulatory status, purchasing clout, economic scale and administrative efficiencies that many large corporations currently utilize.

In 2006, the WTCA Legislative Committee, with your help, will endeavor to host not only the annual Legislative Conference in Washington, DC in May, but also a series of Congressional district meetings throughout the year. All in an effort to build stronger relationships with key members of Congress and gain a voice for our industry on these very important issues. In addition, members of the committee and WTCA staff will work with various federal and state regulatory agencies to minimize the enforcement burden of existing laws.

Looking forward, many things on Capitol Hill remain uncertain. However, by mid-November of this year, Democrats and Republicans will have played out their game of national elections. They'll be muddy, bloody, and some will likely need stitches. But I can at least guarantee it won't end with a tie score. **SBC**

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