

Walden: ‘Democracy was meant to be messy and loud’

Continued from Page A1

shutdown that stretched into 2019.

He was also one of eight Republicans voting that year against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in public facilities or programs. And he was among the Republicans siding with Democrats on a resolution disapproving of President Donald Trump’s action to ease sanctions against three Russian companies.

In October 2019, Walden announced he would not seek reelection and would retire in 2021, setting up a three-way contest for the next committee ranking member.

He said he hopes his successor follows the formula he tried to adhere to, especially in following regular congressional order rather than bringing legislation to the floor without input from rank-and-file members.

“I always tried to do hearings, and then markups, you know, and subcommittee and full committee,” Walden said. “I think it’s really important to do that and to realize that people sitting on the other side of the dais aren’t your enemies. They may just have different views.”

A former congressional staffer in the 1980s, Walden said he disagrees with the conventional wisdom that Congress has gotten more partisan.

He noted his work on legislation with Assistant House Democratic Leader Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., whom he considers a friend. He pointed out that he was the former chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee while Lujan previously chaired the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, yet they were able to cooperate together.

“I think there’s a healthy dose of bipartisanship, and I actually think it’s more now than before,” Walden said.

He pointed to the forma-



Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer, left, shows Rep. Greg Walden images from immediately after last month’s flooding during a tour of the Cor-Tek manufacturing facility in Pendleton. In October 2019, Walden announced he would not seek reelection and would retire in 2021.

tion of groups like the Problems Solvers Caucus in uniting lawmakers to “bring policy to the middle where it can become law and be good and balanced.”

While Walden rose to the ranks of Energy and Commerce after serving as chairman of the Communications and Technology Subcommittee, he became an influential player in health care policy.

The Oregon lawmaker said he saw how his district and others were “shattered by addiction,” prompting him to do 10 or 11 different roundtables in his district with people affected by the drug epidemic.

That idea grew into the 2018 opioid law, which encompasses more than

70 smaller bills related to treatment, prevention, research, recovery efforts and enforcement.

“I think that was an extraordinary piece of legislation, and you know, you work on a lot of bills here but seldom can you say that you’ve passed something that really saves lives,” said Walden, cautioning that the need to work to reduce addiction and support mental health treatment continues.

Last week, the House passed smaller standalone bills including one that would help combat drug trafficking.

“There are several things that we need to do,” he said, emphasizing that the committee should amp up oversight to see what provisions

of the 2018 law are working. “We’ve continued that on our side, and there’s some recommendations coming forward. I just wish we’d done more.”

He also was part of Republican efforts on other issues that fell short.

Walden was a key player in House GOP efforts to repeal and replace the 2010 health law. The legislation, a big priority for Republicans, ultimately did not survive in the Senate.

“I wish we could have gotten to conference with the Senate, and we did our mighty best and came up one vote short, because then I think we would have had some more flexibility in how we wrote the bill,” Walden said.

“When the only way you can write a health care bill was in the context of budget reconciliation, boy, it handcuffed us in our ability to be creative on health care policy.”

The fate of the health law currently lies in the hands of the Supreme Court, which heard oral arguments Nov. 10 on a challenge that could potentially prompt Congress to respond if the court strikes down parts of the law.

More recently, Walden has focused on efforts to lower the cost of prescription drugs and end surprise medical billing.

House Democrats backed a drug pricing bill that was rejected by Senate Republicans. Opponents of that bill

argued it would stifle innovation of new drugs.

“We as Republicans were very hesitant about not blocking innovation when it comes to health care,” Walden said, pointing to current efforts to bring a COVID-19 vaccine or treatment to market.

A Congressional Budget Office previously estimated the bill could result in eight to 15 fewer drugs being developed over the following decade.

“Well, for goodness’ sakes, we sit here on the cusp of a scientific miracle breakthrough with vaccines for COVID that’s going to be 95% effective,” he said. “What if you had backed up 10 years and had this regime in place? Where would we be on innovation, and would one of those vaccines be one of those eight or 10 new drugs, never developed? I don’t know.”

Walden said the fight over drug pricing got too political, compared to some more bipartisan legislative packages like the opioid law or a 2016 medical innovation law designed to spur more cures.

In recent months, legislation to end surprise medical billing has taken a back seat during the pandemic, which Walden regrets.

“I wish we, then or now, could have gotten to the issue of surprise medical billing. We still don’t have that done. What a rip-off to consumers,” he said. “There’s no excuse for letting that continue on.”

He remains somewhat optimistic that surprise billing legislation could cross the finish line in the lame-duck session.

“We have a really good bipartisan, bicameral solid piece of policy here that protects the consumers, but I’ll tell you, it’s a tough business taking on the medical industrial complex,” Walden said. “I think we’re close to getting something that can get through, hopefully before the end of the year.”

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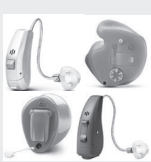
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