

9.12.23 TRANSCRIPT: Senator Collins Floor Speech on the First Appropriations Minibus

Sen. Collins: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, I'm very pleased to join Chair Murray, as we begin debate on the first of what I hope will be a series of Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations packages considered on the Senate floor in the coming weeks. And I want to commend Chair Murray, for her leadership, for her bipartisanship, for her relentlessness in getting us to where we are today. It did take a lot of work, and it has been a pleasure to be her partner.

When Chair Murray and I took the helm of the Appropriations Committee at the beginning of that year, we set forth the goal of returning regular order to the appropriations process. Now, Chair Murray and I have served in the Senate long enough that we remember what regular order means. It means going through the committee process, reporting bills out after hearings and a markup, bringing them to the Senate floor. But many of our colleagues, on both sides of the aisle, have never experienced regular order. That's how long it has been since we've done the process the right way. The system just works better when we adhere to regular order, with committee members having the opportunity to shape legislation, and the Senate as a whole having the chance to work its will. Regular order is not easy. In fact, it is a lot of work. Our committee members spent much of the winter and spring in hearing rooms, holding nearly 50 subcommittee hearings and briefings on the President's Fiscal Year 2024 budget request. We scrutinized the funding levels, evaluated the programs, and asked the tough questions. In June and July, our members were hard at work at developing, drafting, and advancing the Fiscal Year 2024 funding bills. For the first time ever, our committee markets were televised, so that our deliberations and our votes on amendments, and on passage of each bill, were fully transparent.

The result, as Senator Murray has said, for the first time in five years, the Senate Appropriations Committee has reported each and every one of the 12 Appropriations bills. All of them passed with strong bipartisan support. Seven of them were approved unanimously. Today, we take the next important step in restoring deliberation to the appropriations process, as we bring the first package of funding bills to the Senate floor. I know that both Chair Murray and I are committed to doing our part to ensure a constructive floor debate with a robust amendment process. This will require the cooperation of all members, and I hope that we will be able to work together toward that goal. It is critical that we succeed in this effort so that we do not once again find ourselves in December, faced with the unpalatable choice among a 4,000-plus-page omnibus bill, a year-long continuing resolution, or worst of all, a government shutdown.

Mr. President, the Republican leader spoke this morning about the importance of the package of bills before us. He noted that this legislation is designed to address a trio of important commitments, to America's farmers, to our veterans, and to investing in transportation infrastructure. He went on to note that 7% of American adults are veterans of our armed forces. I'm pleased to say, in Maine, that percentage is even higher. We rank among the top in the country in the number of veterans, on a per capita basis, who have answered the call to serve. The leader also noted that 10% of American jobs are supported by agriculture, and that our entire economy hinges on safe and efficient railroads, airports, roads, and bridges. Mr. President, the leader's remarks succinctly sums up the importance of these bills.

Our package includes the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs bill, led by Senators Murray and Bozeman. It was approved by the committee on June 22. So, members have had a great deal of time to scrutinize and read the language of that bill. This wasn't something assembled hastily behind closed doors at the last minute. To the contrary, it was subject to in-depth hearings, negotiations, and transparent markups. We're also going to include- I hope -the Agricultural, Rural Development, and Food and Drug Administration bill, written by Senators Heinrich and Hoeven, which was also approved on June 22. A very important bill to the State of Maine, where potatoes are our number one crop. I grew up in Northern Maine, where potatoes are grown, and helped to pick potatoes when I was age 10, and the schools would recess so that the school children could help the farmers get in the crop before the heavy freeze made that impossible. And of course, Maine is also known for its wonderful wild blueberries and many other crops. We're also going to look at and include the Transportation and Housing bill, drafted by Senators Schatz and Hyde-Smith, which was approved on July 20. Each of these bills, Mr. President, each one of them, was reported unanimously. That hardly ever happens around here, and it is a tribute to the chairmen and chairwomen of those subcommittees, and the ranking members, and how hard they worked to put together a bill that reflected not only the views of their subcommittees and the full committee's input, from Chair Murray and me, but from so many other senators who wrote to us with their priorities.

The first bill, the MilCon-VA Appropriations bill, invests in critical Department of Defense infrastructure. It provides funding to support the European and Pacific deterrence initiatives, unfunded construction priorities of the active guard and reserve forces, and improved housing for our service members and their families. So important at a time when we are experiencing recruitment problems. I am particularly pleased that this bill fully funds the Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Program, including the President's request for \$545 million for the dry dock number one at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard located in Kittery, Maine; an essential national security asset for our submarine fleet. This bill also keeps our commitment to our veterans, by funding VA medical care and veterans benefits, including disability compensation programs, education benefits, and vocational rehabilitation and employment training. Like Senator Murray, I too, am the daughter of a World War Two veteran. And thus, our commitment to our veterans is very personal to me. My father was a combat veteran in World War Two who fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He was wounded twice, earned two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star. And it was he who taught me to honor our veterans. I'll never forget as a child, his taking me to the Memorial Day parade every year in our hometown of Caribou, Maine. And he would hoist me high on his shoulders, so that I could see the veterans march by and salute our flag. I'll never forget those lessons, and they're the reason that I care so deeply about the service of our veterans. I want to commend Chair Murray and Ranking Member Bozeman for their great work on this bill. And I know they will describe its provisions in more detail. In fact, Chair Murray already has.

The second bill in the package is the Agriculture Appropriations bill, which funds programs that support our farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. Both the presiding officer and I, I think represent two of the most rural states in America. It also protects our nation's food and drug supply, and ensures that low-income families have access to critical federal nutrition programs. I'm particularly pleased that despite this tight budget environment, this bill provides increased funding for agriculture research to support food security and sustainability, and for FDA

initiatives focused on drug and device shortages, food safety, and critical research focused on neuroscience and ALS. I commend Chairman Heinrich and Ranking Member Hoeven for putting together such a strong bill.

Finally, the third bill in the package provides essential funding for the departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development, and related agencies. Both Chair Murray and I have a soft spot in our hearts for this bill because each of us spent many years as either the chair or the ranking member of the T-HUD Subcommittee. It supports the RAISE grant transportation program and the Bridge Formula Program, that help address our nation's deteriorating infrastructure. It invests in the FAA, supporting the addition of 1,800 air traffic controllers. We have a huge shortage in Bangor, Maine. I've heard from the air traffic controllers about how terribly understaffed they are. And the bill would modernize outdated systems, such as the Notice to Air Mission system that went offline earlier this year, shutting down the nation's airspace for several hours. I'm especially pleased that this bill contains support for the shoreside infrastructure improvements at our nation's state maritime academies, including Maine Maritime Academy, that are necessary for docking the newly constructed National Security Multi-Mission Vessels, that are also the training ships for the maritime academies. At a time when virtually every state faces an affordable housing shortage, this bill also maintains existing rental assistance for more than 4.6 million households, and continues to make meaningful investments aimed at tackling the persistent and growing problem of the homelessness, especially among our nation's veterans, and youth. I thank Chair Schatz and Ranking Member Hyde-Smith for their tremendous efforts on this bill.

I also want to mention that both senators from Hawaii, and Senator Schatz again today, have talked to all of us about the tragic loss of life and devastation that the recent wildfires have caused in his beloved home state. I know that the presiding officer, representing the state of Vermont, also has had a need for disaster assistance, as has the State of Maine and so many other states. We need to support the people of states who have been hit by these devastating disasters in their time of need. Let me conclude my opening remarks by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to all of our committee members, particularly our subcommittee chairs and ranking members, for their extraordinary work in getting us to this point. And again, I especially want to commend Chair Murray for her leadership and commitment.

I look forward to a productive floor debate as we move forward, and I ask my colleagues for their support. The choice before the Senate is clear. Do we want to pass, with amendments, carefully considered funding bills? Or do we want to default to either, an omnibus bill, many 1,000s of pages long and with very little transparency, or worse, a year-long resolution that funds programs that are no longer needed, prevents new programs from starting up, wastes taxpayer dollars, and is subject to indiscriminate cuts due to the provisions of the Fiscal Responsibility Act? Mr. President, the choice is very clear. The Senate should proceed to debate, consider amendments, and pass the appropriations bills.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.