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HOUSE PASSES DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Strong Support for Connecticut Defense Industry; More work to be done to strengthen benefits for military families

WASHINGTON, D.C.- The House of Representatives passed a defense authorization package Wednesday night that continued support for several programs key to Connecticut's defense industry and made some progress in improving conditions for the nation's troops. However, it failed to adopt measures that would have improved troops' overall quality of life or halt the latest round of base closings, said Congressman John B. Larson.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 (H.R. 1815) authorized \$441.6 billion in spending for national defense programs and an additional \$49.1 billion in emergency supplemental funding for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. For men and women in uniform, it provides a 3.1 percent pay raise and increases the overall size of the active-duty force by 11,000. It also funds the F/A-22, Joint Strike Fighter and submarine construction.

◆ This bill reaffirms that Connecticut is a vital part of our nation's defense," Larson said. ◆ Through their ongoing advancements, Connecticut continues to equip our military with the cutting-edge technology that helps maintain our unrivalled strength. ◆

Larson said that the New London Submarine Base and the 103rd Fighter Wing out of Bradley Airport are also critical components of what the state brings to national defense. Larson joined a bipartisan coalition in supporting an amendment to delay the BRAC process until Congress received critical reports regarding future force structure needs. While the amendment ultimately failed, Larson vowed to press on.

◆Quite simply, this is the wrong process at the wrong time,◆ Larson said. ◆It is inconceivable that we are spending almost \$600 million to build the most expensive U.S. embassy in history in Baghdad at the same time we are devastating our own infrastructure here in America.◆

◆If the Pentagon and President are determined to downsize our military installations, it is better that we proceed with caution rather than rush headlong without all the facts,◆ Larson said. ◆Considering that we are at war and trying to maximize our homeland security, I◆d say some of those facts are still in flux.◆

Larson said that while the pay increase and troop additions marked some progress, they amount to baby steps. Larson said that overall, the Republicans◆ commitment to our troops falls short.

The defense bill also included an amendment offered by Rep. Butterfield (D-NC) that hastened the elimination of the Disabled Veterans◆ Tax for about 29,000 military retirees - those with 60 to 90 percent disability ratings who are unable to work as a result of their disability. But another amendment proposed by Rep. Jim Marshall (D-GA) to completely end the Disabled Veterans◆ Tax for about 400,000 military retirees who were left out of the partial repeal enacted in 2003 was blocked from being offered by the Republican- dominated Rules Committee.

Other Democratic efforts to further expand Guard and Reserve access to healthcare were also derailed by the Republican leadership. Larson joined other Democrats in supporting an amendment to the defense bill offered by Rep. Gene Taylor that would have allowed Guard and Reservists, who are currently covered by TRICARE only when they are mobilized for active duty, to buy into TRICARE for an affordable monthly premium. Despite a concerted last push by Democrats Wednesday night, the amendment narrowly failed by a vote of 211-218.

Earlier this year, Congressman Larson and Congressman Taylor introduced H.R. 1169, the Reserve Reserves Pay and Benefits Modernization Initiative Act which would provide Guard and Reservists access to the TRICARE health care system.

◆Republicans have repeatedly brushed off legislation that would provide greater support for America's troops and veterans,◆ Larson said. ◆It's insupportable that the Republican leadership thinks it's too much for members of the Guard and reservists who risk their lives for their country to ask for affordable health care in return.◆

Funding for major defense programs important to Connecticut include:

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\$3.8 billion for the F/A-22 Raptor - 24 aircraft

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\$4.9 billion for the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) for Research and Development

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\$3.2 billion for the C-17 - 15 aircraft

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\$658 million for 46 Black Hawks for the Army and National Guard (an increase of \$74 million more and five additional aircraft above the President's request)

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\$555 million for 12 MH-60R Navy Sea Hawk helicopters

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\$504 million for 26 MH-60S Navy Sea Hawk Helicopters

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