

Feingold, Sensenbrenner have held most town hall meetings

Sensenbrenner has conducted 72 sessions, Feingold has held 69

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WAUKESHA – While most voters might not think their elected officials are listening to them, two Wisconsin leaders are giving them plenty of opportunities to hear their concerns.

According to Roll Call Magazine, U.S. Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner, R-Menomonee Falls, and U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Middleton, have held more “town hall” listening sessions than any other of their colleagues in either the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.

“I think it’s something he prides himself on to be there for his constituents,” said Wendy Riemann, spokesperson for Sensenbrenner. “That’s a label that’s pretty accurate and it’s definitely a good thing.”

As of Thursday, Sensenbrenner has conducted 72 town hall listening sessions in the 5th Congressional District during 2010 and plans to hold another 26 in July, which will bring the final total this year to 98, due to rules barring sessions in the fall because of the upcoming election.

In 2009, Sensenbrenner held 125 town hall meetings.

Feingold has held 69 listening sessions this year across the state as part of his annual pledge to hold sessions in every one of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.

According to the Roll Call report, the next closest senator to Feingold has only held 37 town hall meetings this year.

Feingold told The Freeman hot topics at his sessions have varied from county to county, but concerns over health care reform have died down since the health care reform bill was passed into law.

“In the years I’ve been doing this, only two or three times has the tone become really intense,” Feingold said. “(O)verall the tone of them has been pretty low key, with the majority of the sessions being sort of calm with people being very respectful.”

Although listening sessions often drew a handful of people in past years, both Feingold and Sensenbrenner are seeing much bigger crowds at their meetings. Riemann said some venues that would draw 10 people two years ago now will draw more than 100, with people raising concerns about health care reform, the economy, jobs and other hot issues being undertaken by the federal government.

“You can see a distinct difference and you can tell people are paying attention on the issues,” she said. “You hear a lot of outrage about spending and getting that under control, and you still hear people who are concerned about Obamacare.”

Feingold said crowds for his sessions have varied greatly with lots of people coming to meetings in more populated counties and during the heart of the health care debate, compared to more recent sessions in more rural locations.

“I think it’s excellent to be known as a senator who’s accessible to his constituents,” he said. “Some of those crowds are not big Russ Feingold supporters, but I’m willing to go into those crowds without any prearrangements and let the people say what they want and I’m proud of that.”