http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/fairgoers-s5.jpg



Many people share the same concerns related to health care, the condition of the roads, and specific legislation that will help their home business. Others share their work with those who struggle with addiction.

ALMA, WI - I love county fairs. I love the sights, sounds, smells and the tastes of the fair. Moreover, I love all the people. Adorable little kids wander around with snow cones. Grandparents catch up on family news. Hardworking 4-Hers show cattle, cakes and cookies.

I especially love the opportunity for conversations with voters about what's important. The relaxed atmosphere of the fair invites good conversations about what's going on and how our state should help.

Cookies, roads and health care took up much of my conversations.

Several home bakers spoke with me about a recent court decision that found a group of home bakers could sell cookies and cakes at a local farmers' market. But, the court decision did not apply to all of our state's home bakers, which frustrated Charlene of Hixton and Ashley of Merrilllan.

Charlene told me home baking "will come to a screeching halt" if lawmakers don't pass legislation called the "Cookie Bill." The proposal, which I support, allows people to sell up to

$25,000 of baked goods at farmers' markets. I voted in favor of this bill in committee and in the full Senate. However, for reasons unknown, the Assembly won't take up the bill.

Ashley has sold home baked goods for over a decade. The cinnamon rolls at Molly's café in Black River Falls were her creation. She pointed out that "we give people a choice when they can pick up fresh baked goods made that day."

Several bakers invited me to the Jackson County Farmers' Market by the Lunda Center on Thursday from 2:00pm - 6:00pm and Saturday from 9:00am - 1:00pm.

Bad roads were also on people's minds. Due to no increase in road aid from the state, Jackson County officials were forced to turn black top roads back to gravel. One man told me, "We've got to fix the roads. We can't keep borrowing money and sending it to southeast Wisconsin. Roads are the backbone of Wisconsin." He read my column about increasing the gas tax by a nickel. "My mom said to raise it by twelve-cents," he directed me.

Health care was a hot topic too.

Bobby from Eau Claire shared her concerns about chronically ill patients she works with struggle to get needed care. She told me how the type of insurance a patient has can dictate what care they receive, not the doctor's orders. "If you have regular Medicare or Medicaid, you can get the treatment you need," she said. "But if you have another insurance – that is paid for by Medicaid or Medicare – you have to go through this long prior authorization process."

Bobby also pointed out that "people can't afford the premiums, the deductibles. We need a one-payer system that puts everyone on the same level playing field."

I heard over and over again stories about the middle class feeling squeezed.

People shared their struggles in daily life, such as a woman whose nine-year old son kept trying

to pull her away. His two front teeth were missing. She signed up for food stamps after her partner was injured and couldn't work. Trying to keep her family fed meant trips to the food pantry.

I also met people reaching out to help those less fortunate. Donna spends her life helping foster children. "Thirty-eight percent of kids in foster care end up homeless. Half of children who are homeless used to be in foster care," she told me. She started her own nonprofit called Network for Youth to help foster kids.

I talked with Tena who is just as passionate about the mission to rescue people from the destructive path of addiction. She started a group called #StoptheStigma.

"We ask no questions. We make no judgements. We meet our people where they are. We save people one individual at a time," she said. Tena is Ho-chunk. Many of her fellow workers are also Ho-Chunk.

She emphasized that, "our people are everyone suffering from addiction… We speak up for all who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute."

The county fair is a snapshot of our lives; people facing struggles and people who are the heroes; people who make our communities great and so special. It is always an honor and joy for me to engage with them in conversation.