

Sen. Domenici bid farewell at Alamogordo luncheon; retiring statesman fears for U.S. future

Alamogordo Daily News

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Article Launched: 08/21/2008 12:00:00 AM MDT



Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., grins during an event held Wednesday...
(J.R. Oppenheim/DailyNews)



As he is escorted by former Committee of 50 chair Toots Green, left,...
(J.R. Oppenheim/Daily News)

Bidding farewell to 36-year New Mexico Senator Pete Domenici, Alamogordo's Committee of 50 had some kind words and gifts for the senator as he moves into retirement.

During a luncheon event Wednesday, multiple community members stepped up to thank Domenici for the work he has done on behalf of Alamogordo and New Mexico.

Mayor Steve Brockett proclaimed Aug. 20 through 26 as Senator Pete Domenici Week in Alamogordo. Holloman Air Force Base vice commander Col. Mike McGee said with all that Domenici has done for the base it should be renamed Domenici Air Force Base.

White Sands Missile Range Commander Brig. Gen. Rick McCabe, said Domenici was instrumental in making WSMR the premier test bed in the United States.

Long time WSMR Public Affairs Administrator Larry Furrow said he and Domenici have a lot of things in common.

"We love New Mexico," he said. "We love White Sands Missile Range and we are both foot soldiers in Toots Green's army."

Other community members shared some memories and gifts, including money raised for a Domenici project, the Mind Research Network for working with the mentally disabled. Then, Green rose to introduce Domenici.

Green, a former chairman of the Committee of 50 and an active advocate for the support of HAFB in the community, said Domenici has always been ready to listen to concerns.

Domenici stood up from his comfortable chair on stage and told the audience his disease, which has prevented him from running for a seventh term in office, is “steady and still and not doing anything.”

Domenici, 75, has been diagnosed with an incurable brain disorder known as frontotemporal lobar degeneration, or FLTD. He has said he declined to run for another term in office because he didn’t want to fail the people of the state mid-term.

He said while the disease itself looks better, his aches and pains are just getting bigger. “It’s not been easy to go through these events,” he said. “I had the Senate figured out but I don’t have retirement figured out.”

He said many more people are coming to these events to thank him than he every could have imagined. The most important thing he has done in his years as a senator is to get to know the people of the state, he said.

“I don’t think you can be a good official if you don’t know and cherish the people you serve,” Domenici said.

Sometimes people have been angry with him, he said, but he is not one to lie to them.

“I tell them when they are doing things not good for people,” he said. “That group that despised me because of the ditches, they were wrong.”

He referred to some citizens of Alamogordo who picketed Domenici when he was trying to push the Big Ditch project.

Domenici said he believes we live in an economically dangerous world.

“We are in a real muddle,” he said. “How do we compete in the world? All kinds of people tell us what we need to do.”

The key to competing with the rest of the world is in education, Domenici said. The United States needs to educate its children in math, science, physics and engineering. Teachers have to be brought up to speed because there are not enough of them who teach those skills.

“We will not prosper without innovation and breakthroughs,” he said. “I am hopeful. Thousands of teachers need to be retooled.”

Domenici said he does not know what he is going to do with his retirement.

“I will try to accommodate more to my wife if she wants that,” he said. “But I am quite sure she will suggest I go find something big to do.”

Talking about his accomplishments in the past 27 years, Domenici recapped the recent unanimous passage of a full parity bill for the mentally ill. Mental illness now must be treated like cancer or any other disease by the insurance companies, he said.

He counted two balanced budgets in his 23 years on the budget committee as among his accomplishments.

Crediting himself as part of a renaissance in nuclear power, Domenici said the future of energy is important to look at.

“We went to sleep and the whole world took it (nuclear energy innovation) over, led by France,” he said.

In 1997, Domenici spoke to a symposium at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, “A New Nuclear Paradigm.” Since that speech, a bill has been passed and 18 applications for nuclear energy units have been made across the United States, he said.

Domenici said he is discouraged by the state of Washington today, saying everything has become about partisanship.

“Partisanship destroys leadership and that is the middle of what we are in now,” he said Domenici said the generals of America are its best leaders today. They are better educated and better versed than other leadership groups.

“We are damn fortunate to have them with how complicated the world is,” he said. “Hold on to your hats.”

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