

# An engineer in Washington

Bruce Westerman takes the problem-solving skills he's learned as a P.E. to Congress

By **Steve Brawner**  
Editor

The United States government has a problem: The fuel tax is raising less money for highways at the same time that highway construction costs are rising.

So Rep. Bruce Westerman, R-Arkansas, has proposed a possible solution. Currently, Uncle Sam provides more funding per beneficiary for states to expand their Medicaid populations by adding able-bodied adults than it does for traditional beneficiaries – the disabled and the aged. Westerman says funding for that new population should be reduced to traditional levels. Half of the resulting \$30 billion surplus would be spent on highways and the other half dedicated to reducing the federal budget deficit.

Westerman's bill would mean less money for Arkansas' private option, which he opposed when he was majority leader in the Arkansas House of Representatives, and he's been criticized for his proposal. But according to Westerman, it's all about setting priorities the way he did as an engineer at Hot Springs-based Mid-South Engineering.

Elected in 2014, Westerman is one of only a handful of engineers in Congress, just as he was one of only a handful of engineers in the state Legislature. He recently recorded a video for the National Society of Professional Engineers discussing his political involvement. His service required him to leave a fulfilling career at Mid-South. However, he says he uses some of the same skills in Washington that he learned at the University of Arkansas and in his engineering career. It's all about solving problems.

Arkansas Professional Engineer spoke with Westerman June 3 between votes on the House floor.

**How are you taking your engineering background into Congress?**

"Well, it's kind of one of those things that sticks with you wherever you go,



Photo courtesy of Rep. Bruce Westerman's office

and then I do the work of researching, of writing bills, of sharing ideas with others. And then trying to get something passed is kind of the 'present the answer' part of it."

**When you do this when you're working with Mid-South Engineering, you're mostly dealing with people who think logically and rationally and try to deal with facts. And in Congress, you don't always deal with people who are thinking that way.**

"(Laughs.) Yeah, but that doesn't change the fact that there's logic and reason out there, so I want to always be

and I'm finding that the same benefits of being an engineer that I had serving in the Legislature or on the school board are here serving in Congress. And it gets back to the problem-solving ability that engineers learn, that they're taught in college and practice every day in the real world."

**How would you apply your problem-solving ability to a public policy issue?**

"Well, the problem-solving method, you define the problem; you come up with a plan. In engineering, we say you do the math and then you present the answer. That's how I kind of approach things here in Congress is I look at what the issues are and try to make sure I define the problem correctly, and then I use the creative process to come up with potential ways to solve that particular issue,

consistent in doing a logical analysis of presenting the facts and trying to come up with a rational answer. And as you said, when you're doing that as an engineer, you're generally doing it for someone that's looking for a logical, rational answer. And that's not to say that you never have to go back and modify things, but usually once you come up with a good plan and present it, it gets accepted and implemented."

**In the engineering world.**

"In the engineering world. And I'm working hard to see that happen in the political world. It takes time."

**So are the people illogical, or is the process illogical, or why don't we have logic ruling the day up there? Or am I wrong about that premise entirely?**

**“ I still get to do problem-solving, and really that’s what engineering is: problem solving. I’ve heard more than one engineer describe themselves as ‘glorified problem solvers,’ that engineering school taught you the problem-solving method and it gave you the tools to solve complex problems, and the experience that you get after you get out of school is where you really learn what engineering’s about. ”**

- Rep. Bruce Westerman

“I think it’s just the fact that you’ve got so many different perspectives and world views represented in Congress. I mean, it truly is a slice or a cross-section of the country that you see here, and the 435 people in the House and the 100 members in the Senate, and then of course you’ve got the president, so you’ve got people that approach issues with a different world view. Some things that may be an issue to one person may not be an issue to another one. So I look for those things that I believe are common issues among everyone, like highway and transportation funding that affects everyone, and I look for creative ways to solve those problems.”

**So do you treat this diversity and these difficulties as another engineering problem? I mean, people in some ways are just an engineering problem, too, to be solved, to be worked around, like you would anything else.**

“Yeah, I guess if you looked at it like a computer program, the program just gets more complex. (There are) so many more constraints on a program, and so many more variables and inputs on it.

“But that’s part of what makes our country great is the variety of ideas that come together. I like to have the intellectual debate and talk about ideas and really have an honest intellectual discussion on things, and I believe that the best answers and the truth usually rise to the top. And I can respect someone when they disagree, but I have a problem when people just ignore the facts when it’s things that you probably just shouldn’t disagree on because it’s not really subjective. It’s really more objective data.”

**Do you think that most people in Congress at least try to look at objective data and make decisions based on**


**that, and they just have different world views? Or are there a lot of members of Congress who aren’t objective?**

“I think most members of Congress would like to be objective, but you’re representing 700,000-800,000 people, and you get input from all different groups of people and they’ve all got different ideas, and sometimes I think that clouds the objectiveness of the process. Or it’s where politics comes in where you may be trying to achieve a long-term goal and not necessarily concerned with some of the short-term effects on it. And that can be frustrating, but it’s still all something that I think you can, if you evaluate enough, that you can see it for what it is and figure out how to navigate through all of that.”

**Are you the only engineer in Congress, the only P.E.?**

“No, there are a few more, and I am the only forester in Congress, which is kind of unique from my professional training. I’m in two areas where there’s just not a whole lot of representation to share in Congress, and that’s good in a way, and it’s bad in a way. It’s bad in a sense that I think we need more engineers in Congress. I think we need more people that are purely problem solvers. But from a selfish personal perspective, it’s good because if there’s not many people that have a certain expertise, then more people come to you to ask questions when an issue comes up, and especially on the forestry side of things. I’m kind of the only forester in Congress. I’m going to be running the forestry bill this year as a freshman, which is a big honor for me to be able to do that. ... It’s the bill that establishes the policy for the Forest Service. It’s more than just the Forest Service; it’s the policy for the management of timber on public lands.”

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Photo courtesy of Rep. Bruce Westerman's office

### **Are you going to change anything?**

"Yeah. I just got out of a hearing this afternoon where we did the initial review of the bill. I'm going to file the bill tomorrow, and we're really looking at it, again using science and forestry management and trying to take the political part out of it so that the employees of the Forest Service who are trained, educated people who just want to do their job, we're



trying to make it where they can do their job and help make our forests more resilient and healthy. We've got a huge problem with wildfire in our country, and a big part of that is because of the lack of management on the forests that's being created because of litigation and political agendas that have learned how to manipulate the system so that the Forest Service employees can't do their job."

### **Do you hang out with the other engineers?**

"Not so much. I've met a couple of them. But I tell you, you get on your committees, and those are kind of the people you see, and the freshmen I came in with, those are the ones that I've kind of made personal friendships with along with others. But I haven't just had a chance to sit down in a group with the other engineers."

### **Why aren't there more engineers in Congress?**

"I think part of that's because engineering from a personal perspective is a very fulfilling career. You invest a lot of time and effort into becoming an engineer, and, you know, when you're doing engineering work you get to see your ideas come into reality. So I think engineers just get too busy with their careers and being good citizens and raising families and building businesses that not enough of them get involved in politics, whether

that's local level or federal level. Any time I talk to engineering groups, I try to encourage them to get involved, even if it's on a volunteer level, to get involved and share some of their talents back with society. Some of the things I've done are even from my church on building committees and things like that. There's always an opportunity for engineers to share their expertise on certain things. When I was on the school board, we did a lot of building projects, and having an engineering background helped out with that."

### **How is Congress different than the Legislature?**

"Well, it's obviously much larger. It's 435 of us versus 100 in the Legislature. Congress is pretty much full-time, year-round, so there's not the mad rush to get bills done in a certain time frame, so you get a chance to slow down and kind of understand the legislation a little better up here. You know, there's more zeros before the decimal point up here."

### **Your bill that you've filed to transfer money from Medicaid to the highways, is that an example of an engineering solution?**

"Yeah, and I think that's more of a business approach, of prioritizing. We're spending out of control on our mandatory side of spending. And this is a frustrating thing of engineering in Congress. I can sit down and explain that to any-

one, and I believe a rational person would understand where I'm coming from, that I'm just trying to make it on the Medicaid side where we're not paying more for able-bodied working age adults than we are for elderly people and disabled people. I'm trying to level the playing field there because I think it's an injustice when you're paying a 43 percent premium for able-bodied working age adults, and I say we should prioritize that money and put it into highways and transportation. Well, you know, people take that and they write things and say things like I'm going to take money away from poor people to build roads. And things can be twisted, and there can be a spin put on anything. So you've got to stick to your messaging and stick to the truth in what you're doing, and that's one where that to me it's about priorities and removing the injustice in the funding system on that mandatory spending program."

### **Do you miss engineering?**

"Yeah, I do. ... But I still get to do problem-solving, and really that's what engineering is: problem solving. I've heard more than one engineer describe themselves as 'glorified problem solvers,' that engineering school taught you the problem-solving method and it gave you the tools to solve complex problems, and the experience that you get after you get out of school is where you really learn what engineering's about."