

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF PORTAGE,
MICHIGAN

• Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, one-half century ago this month the residents of Portage Township made a significant and lasting decision. They voted in February 1963 to incorporate, becoming the city of Portage. This decision provided many opportunities for this nascent, vibrant community to grow, enabling city leaders and residents alike to chart a course for future prosperity. This milestone will be commemorated in a number of ways throughout the year, including at Portage's city council meeting last night.

The city of Portage is a part of Michigan's rapidly evolving story. Historically, residents and community leaders relied on fertile farmland for agriculture production. In fact, in the late 1880s and early 1900s, this area was known as "Celery City." Today, it is home to thriving businesses, welcoming neighborhoods and abundant natural beauty. The population of Portage has more than doubled in the past half century, and a number of new businesses, large and small, have helped to transform the city's economic base.

As part of the celebration, Portage recently unveiled its new motto, "A Natural Place to Move." It speaks to the city's continued commitment to preserving its many parks, lakes, and trails in a way that encourages residents to stay active and healthy.

It is fitting that the celebrations planned this year include a mix of activities. A commemorative newsletter in February will highlight the city's rich history; a half-marathon and 5K road race later this month will showcase the city's extensive and impressive park system; volunteer opportunities spread throughout the year offer residents a number of ways to give back to their community; and a 50th anniversary concert this summer as part of the 2013 summer concert series will bring families and friends together to celebrate this important anniversary.

The city of Portage and its residents have much to be proud of. Together, they have steadily moved forward. This year is a moment to pause and reflect on the past, and to ensure that the next 50 years continues to be marked by growth and progress. ●

VERMONT ESSAY FINALISTS

• Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask to have printed in the RECORD finalist essays written by Vermont High School students as part of the Third Annual "What is the State of the Union?" Essay contest conducted by my office. These 21 finalists were selected from over 300 entries.

The essays follow.

SYDNEY ALDERMAN, MT. ABRAHAM UNION
HIGH SCHOOL (FINALIST)

Today we often face the problem of excessive violence between people, starvation, and

economic problems. People aren't all getting what they need and something needs to be done. What would fix everything, broaden our universal communications skills and get things done quicker would be to unite globally. By working as an entire unit we can all communicate and work toward the same goal we all crave: peace. Uniting globally can solve conflicts causing violence, starvation, and economic problems.

Uniting globally will benefit the people of the world immensely. By uniting globally it would be much easier to distribute the necessary resources to sustain everyone, such as food, water, and energy. When everyone is on the same page and communicating thoroughly between territories, you can maintain fair trade and further discuss what laws and human rights need to be established as well. When we're all united for a common goal, let's assume peace amongst all people, discussion is more productive and conclusive and proper action can be taken at a faster pace. Actions such as bringing food and water to those who have none, and also getting the area with these conditions re-established for suitable living conditions. Everyone benefits from a united world.

The U.S. economy will be heavily benefited by uniting globally. When we unite globally, trade is faster and we can simply work faster because communication is quicker and more conclusive than when we're all thinking separately. Trade will therefore be quicker and we can be more productive about it with such open communication. It would be easier to discuss the distribution of currency amongst countries and people and how we can fix the current economic problems. Uniting globally will solve the biggest problems of the world. It will broaden the communication between territories and will help us resolve conflicts causing famine, violence, and economic problems universally. When we all band together we can accomplish anything and finally bring a new era of peace.

TYLER BRADLEY, SOUTH BURLINGTON HIGH
SCHOOL (FINALIST)

Our country needs to invest in clean sustainable energy and decrease our dependence for oil from other nations. Our nation should be investing in wind and solar power. Wind is a renewable source of energy, which will last forever. It does not pollute our environment and is all natural. Solar energy also provides us with clean energy, with no combustion. It too is renewable and causes no greenhouse gases. Although wind and solar, as energy sources, may prove to be expensive, it is a small price to pay for the health and safety of our environment. In contrast, we are eventually going to run out of oil and the high cost of transporting oil and our dependency on other nations needs to be eliminated.

We need to stop relying on foreign nations for our energy supply. If foreign governments continue to control oil profits they can use that money to fund terrorism mischief. In addition, these energy rich countries can restrict the oil supply and therefore make the United States a hostage to their demands. We need to end this cycle and invest in more sustainable energy sources.

We need Congress to work harder to obtain sustainable energy tax incentives like the Investment Tax Credit and Production Tax Credits. These credits will help reduce the cost of wind and solar projects and in the long run help reduce global warming. All across our earth we currently see record heat waves, melting glaciers, rising sea levels and extreme droughts and floods. The United States must lead the world in reversing global warming, to preserve a safe planet for our children and grandchildren.

ANNIE ARTHUR, WOODSTOCK UNION HIGH
SCHOOL (FINALIST)

To be a democracy, our country must be able to hear the voices of every citizen individually and the population as a whole. People all over the world are sacrificing their lives for the hope of the right to vote. In the United States, eligibility is simple. To vote, one must be a citizen of the United States and be 18 or older. However, a country as great as ours does not seem able to succeed in a very seemingly simple task: vote freely. The State of our Union is teetering on the edge.

In the 2012 Presidential Election, only 57.5% of the entire eligible population cast their ballots. About 93 million citizens did not participate in this most basic foundation of democracy. How is the United States supposed to run as an effective democracy if so many citizens remain silent in such a crucial time to make their voices heard? Granted, part of this lack of voting is caused by laziness, indifference or belief that one vote will not change the outcome. However, there are many citizens who want to vote but restrictions imposed at the state level have either attempted or succeeded to suppress participation in this election. In this recent election there were laws passed to hinder voter participation by making it difficult to register to vote, requiring voter photo identifications, miscommunication of date and times, and threatening voters with imprisonment for voter fraud. Officials also succeeded in cutting early voting periods, voting by mail, polling hours and number of locations. Even though courts temporarily struck down many of these efforts, there is no reason to believe that state officials will be deterred from imposing more voting restrictions in the future.

This national issue should not be determined at state level. Restriction on voting is a federal problem and should be addressed by federal powers. This is too important an issue to leave to individual state governments as clearly demonstrated by the blatant attempts to deny citizens their right to vote. The solution is to simply create basic standards on voting. The federal government could pass a bill with minimum guidelines for states to follow on voting laws. This legislation does not need to be a complex list of restrictions; this bill would be freeing up voting laws by listing only what needs to happen to achieve successful voting. Each state would then have the freedom to expand on these basic requirements. This bill could facilitate registration, polling hours and ability to mail in votes. It is an American's right to be able to vote. As the world's greatest democracy, no political party should be able to obstruct voting. The United States, a nation for the people, of the people, by the people needs to set a better example as the standard bearer of democracy.

JEANNINE BISSONETTE, CHAMPLAIN VALLEY
UNION HIGH SCHOOL (FINALIST)

Ever since Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1913, it has been a tradition for Presidents to address the nation with their State of the Union report. As President Obama prepares to present his State of the Union address, many politically concerned citizens begin to ponder the thoughts of what will be produced in the next four years.

With a current national unemployment rate of 7.9%, the numbers appear to be much lower than the 10% that the United States endured during October of 2009. Although these rates suggest a recuperating recession, they have not yet reached a level in which the nation can sit back comfortably. These high unemployment rates understandably result in a greater necessity for more families to reach out to social welfare services such