

## **The Chamber Goes to Washington**

By David Smith, president/CEO

BACC Board Chair Ron Ostermiller and I attended the U.S. Chamber's Small Business Summit in Washington DC April 16-18, 2008.

Panels were conducted that focused on the economy, Americans' mood, the presidential election and business issues. All were extremely valuable, especially the economic outlook from the Chamber's economist Dr. Martin Regalia. On April 17, Ron and I had lunch with Congressman Denny Rehberg, one of his policy advisors and the government affairs director of the Billings Chamber. We discussed several business issues with Rep. Rehberg -- chief among those being the expiration of the Bush Tax Cuts of 2001 and 2003.

That afternoon, we had an appointment with Sen. Max Baucus, but he was in the third day of negotiating the Farm Bill. Ron and I only had a few minutes with the senator, but we re-emphasized continuing the Bush Tax Cuts. We did have about one hour with one of his policy specialists. We discussed opposition to the Patent Reform Act, support for Association Health Plans/Pooling, and support for community infrastructure projects.

But the highlight of the program was a speech by President Bush to the group. The President stated that small business will be hit with a \$4,000/year tax increase if the cuts are not made permanent. President Bush also emphasized the need to ratify a Free Trade Agreement with Columbia, Panama and South Korea. Columbian imports are duty-free in America, yet American small businesses pay a 14% duty to export. There are 9,000 companies that currently pay the duty, and 8,000 are small and medium-sized businesses. Columbia is an ally of the United States' and a strong opponent to dictatorships such as Venezuela's and to the illegal drug trade. The agreement was reached 500 days ago and Congress has not passed it, saying that Columbia has not made enough progress on environmental issues.

The President also supported health plan pooling and opposing the "Card Check" legislation, which discontinues secret ballots by employees on unionization. He closed his comments by issuing strong support for reform of frivolous lawsuits.

"The purpose of good policy in Washington is to unleash entrepreneurship. Let's let you stay more in the shop than in the courthouse," Bush concluded.