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Protesters shouting 'do your job' and 'meet with us' disrupt Deb Fischer's talk in Lincoln



MATT MILLER/THE WORLD-HERALD

Protesters with the group Betsy Riot carry signs outside a luncheon meeting of the Lincoln Independent Business Association, at which Nebraska Sen. Deb Fischer was speaking Tuesday. A different group, "Indivisible Lincoln," called the protest to object to Fischer's willingness to speak to special interest groups but not with the general public.

By Paul Hammel / World-Herald Bureau Feb 22, 2017

LINCOLN — Between 200 and 300 protesters, shouting phrases like “Do your job” and “Meet with us,” disrupted the final moments of a speaking engagement of U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., on Tuesday.

Fischer, back in Nebraska during a recess week for Congress, spoke at noon during a closed meeting of the Lincoln Independent Business Association at a downtown Lincoln meeting hall.

A group called “Indivisible Lincoln” had called for a protest to object to her unwillingness to schedule a town hall meeting with the general public while making time for a special interest group like the business association.

As Fischer was wrapping up a question-and-answer session with association members, a group of protesters who had gathered outside the Grand Manse building began entering hallways of the structure, chanting “Do your job.”

Some began banging on a window that separated a hallway from the meeting hall where Fischer was answering questions. Her appearance ended shortly after the disruption.

Protesters never gained entrance to the meeting hall, and no one was arrested.

Fischer ultimately left the building via a back door. She waved at a group of about 50 protesters gathered there who carried signs with messages including “Be a no way in hell woman, not a yes woman.”

Protesters interviewed said Fischer needs to meet with voters to explain her support for President Donald Trump’s Cabinet appointments, particularly the tapping of wealthy businesswoman and charter school advocate Betsy DeVos to head the Education Department.

“I want (Fischer) to work for Nebraskans. Not the party, not for Trump,” said Debra Rhodes, a retired federal worker from Lincoln.

“(DeVos) is not there to help public schools, she’s there to help charter schools,” said Rose Klein, another Lincoln retiree.

Reporters were barred from attending Fischer’s speech to Lincoln Independent Business Association, which typically allows such coverage. However, through a door, the first-term senator could be overheard

defending her vote to confirm DeVos in response to one question from the audience.

As she has said previously, Fischer said she got assurances from the nominee in an interview and a later letter that the federal government would not force Nebraska to allow charter schools. Nebraska is one of only seven states that do not allow such schools, which use tax dollars but operate independently and serve as an alternative to public schools.

Town hall meetings held by members of Congress continue to draw crowds upset with the proposed end of Obamacare and other goals of the new administration. Some have speculated that lawmakers now are not holding such public sessions to avoid testy confrontations with constituents.

The protest against Fischer came on the same day that a fellow Republican, Sen. Chuck Grassley, met with angry constituents in neighboring Iowa.

Grassley, who was one of the few Republicans to hold town hall meetings during this congressional break, was greeted with jeers at a standing-room-only town hall in Iowa Falls.

Grassley has said that he believes the town hall forums are a key part of his job.

A story in Monday's World-Herald noted that none of Nebraska's congressional representatives had scheduled town hall meetings, open to the general public, during this week's recess.

For instance, Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., is meeting this morning with members of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce. That event is open to chamber members and the media only.

One of the attendees at Tuesday's business group event, Phil Young, a Lincoln-based political consultant who once advised Fischer, said the senator isn't ducking the public. He said she traditionally schedules town hall meetings with constituents during an August recess.

“If you knew her schedule and how many people she talks to and the broad spectrum of people she talks to, there’s no way she’s not in touch with Nebraskans,” Young said.

Indivisible Lincoln, on its Facebook page, has urged people to call or email Fischer’s offices to voice objections to her support of Trump nominees. One protester said that the group is raising money to rent a hall for a public meeting with Fischer.

There were also five protesters with the group Betsy Riot clad in all black who arrived well before the others, holding signs reading “History frowns on cowards” and calling Fischer a “bootlicker.”

Later, Coby Mach, the head of the Lincoln Independent Business Association and a local radio talk-show host, said Tuesday’s protest showed “first-hand how things have changed in our society.”

“People who don’t care about others’ rights decided to lash out,” Mach said in an open letter to association members.

Fischer’s communications director, Brianna Puccini, issued a statement after the disrupted meeting saying Fischer “always welcomes respectful conversations with Nebraskans.”

Puccini said the senator held 26 “listening sessions” across the state last year, mostly in August, and said she plans to continue such meetings. Puccini said that this week Fischer was meeting with constituents “who have been waiting to meet with her for some time.”

“Our office receives hundreds of invitations every year and Sen. Fischer tries to respond to as many as possible,” Puccini said.

World-Herald staff writer Robynn Tysver contributed to this report.