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By Chelsey Pollock

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SALEM -- U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass met with constituents of New Hampshire's 2nd District Saturday for what he promised would be the first of many town hall meetings during his time in Washington.

Global warming, health-care reform and the national debt were among issues raised by residents at an hour-long meeting at Salem Town Hall, which drew a crowd of about 50 people.

Additional staff members and a police officer provided extra security during the meeting, Bass said, in response to last month's shooting in Arizona.

"The tragedy of Arizona was not only about Congresswoman (Gabrielle) Giffords and the other people who were injured, but the message that it sent to the rest of the constituency that maybe it was not a very good idea to participate in this process," Bass said. "And I think that's bad."

Bass announced he will open a part-time district office in Salem next month. Bass, a Republican, was reelected to his former seat in November.

"This is not a yes-man job," Bass said. "The next two years and perhaps four years are going to be very difficult not only at the federal level, but at the state level and the Rockingham County level and in Salem."

Several people pressed Bass on his recent support of a bill that would prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating carbon dioxide emissions.

"Efforts like the Renewable Energy Standard and the four-pollutant bill are just not really going anywhere. Nothing's happening," said Jessica O'Hara of Concord, a member of the citizen advocacy group Environment New Hampshire. Bass said he disagrees with the interpretation of a 1991 law that allows the EPA to regulate carbon dioxide emissions if it is considered a threat to public health. He said Congress should "start again" after last year's failed energy bill.

"I do not believe that the agency should have command-and-control authority to implement a piece of legislation that failed in the Congress," Bass said. "I know this is controversial, but as a Congressman, I think it is a mistake to allow an agency to do what the Congress failed to do."

But Charlotte Locke of Amherst said she didn't want to wait for congressional action, calling the EPA regulations the "low-risk" option.

"I lie awake at night and I worry about my son's future because I'm thinking of what's going to happen to him because of this climate change," said Locke. "I'm panicky about it and when I think about Congress waiting to make more decisions on it, I don't think it's going to happen."

Addressing health-care reform, Bass said he supports some pieces of Obama's health-care plan, but said he thinks there is still too much uncertainty about how the new law will play out.

"I can't tell you how many small employers told me that the health-care system needs to be better than it was two years ago, but now I can't hire anybody because I have no clue what my obligation is going to be," Bass said. "... We've got to defer its implementation until we figure out what it's going to do."

Other area residents raised topics including illegal immigration, social security and the national debt.

"All the programs we are looking at are well-intentioned, but we don't have the money," said Andy Bridge of Amherst. "We are broke."