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Washington's annual Cherry Blossom Festival was among many public activities that proceeded due to the last-minute aversion of a federal government shutdown last Friday, but New Hampshire District 2 Rep. Charlie Bass said Monday that recent budget deliberations are just the beginning of a longer battle.

Speaking on the phone from the nation's capitol, Bass, a Republican from Peterborough, characterized last week's strained budget negotiations as "the first 100 yards in a 26-mile marathon." The deal that cut nearly \$38.5 billion dollars from the budget was hammered out between House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid with President Obama. It set out spending for the rest of fiscal year 2011 and acted as the overture to fiscal year 2012 budget deliberations, which will likely pick up momentum in September in order to be ready for the fiscal year that begins on Oct. 1.

Discussions leading up to the decision deadline showcased one of the first significant battles for many freshman lawmakers, and served as a stinging reminder to Democrats of their failure to maintain majorities in Congress. "What Democrats haven't gotten is that the world has changed in the last six months," said Bass, who served in the House from 1994 to 2006 before regaining his seat in this past November elections. "The question now isn't about more spending, it's about less spending."

But he acknowledged the limitation of the shift. "The Republican Party needs to understand that it only controls one of the three members at the table, which are the President, the Senate and the House."

While last week's budget showdown pressed elected officials to the brink of a shutdown, with major media outlets reporting extensively on the wideranging impacts of such a move, Bass views current rhetoric as milder than in his erstwhile days under the Clinton administration. "It's much more productive and professional than it was in 1995 and 1996," he said, referring to the last government shutdown that occurred under the Newt Gingrich-led and Republican-controlled Congress when Bass was in office.

Nonetheless, intra-party differences among Republicans began to take shape during negotiations, with fiscal conservatism falling prey to disagreements on the relative significance of hot-button issues like abortion. Reid and Senate Democrats faulted conservative unwillingness to budge on de-funding Planned Parenthood for pushing the government closer to a shutdown.

Bass said government priorities, given the context of the recent economic recession, should be focused on strengthening domestic and local economies and encouraging private sector job creation. "I don't believe that the social agenda and the economic agenda should be linked," he said. "We as Republicans need to focus on the things that Washington can change — which is

spending, and not allowing the social agenda to dominate the debate."

But funding priorities often reflect social priorities, and when asked where cuts could be made, Bass pointed to what he sees as glaring inefficiencies in government administration. Citing a study by the Government Accountability Office, Bass recently testified to the House Budget Committee (chaired by Republican Paul Ryan), "the federal government's efforts to address financial literacy are spread across more than 20 different agencies and roughly 56 programs. Five agencies within the Department of Transportation administer over 100 programs related to surface transportation, totaling \$58 billion. These are just some of the unnecessary and fragmented programs that the federal government should consolidate or eliminate to operate more efficiently."

Government inefficiency has long been a target of budget trimming efforts, but with social entitlement programs taking up the bulk of public spending, deeper structural changes may be necessary to achieve the kind of cuts that Republicans are aiming for.

Among the congressional contests due to come up over the next year, Bass pointed to 11 appropriations bills that need to be passed, a decision on whether or not to raise the debt limit, and the process of budget reconciliation. While each decision will likely see political skirmishes, Bass is gearing up for the discussion over debt limit, a limit that he believes should be raised. The problem, he explained, is that deciding a healthy limit is dependent on current realities, which reflect governmental decisions made in prior years. "The question is, what can we agree to to prevent the growth of government so we can prevent this from happening again?" Bass said, underscoring that raising the limit must be coupled with specific concessions to limit government expansion over the next 10 years. "We won't survive as a nation if we continue to do this."

While Bass said that he hasn't been following similar budget clashes in Concord, the federal budget process echoes many painful belt-tightening adjustments made at every level of government over the last budget cycle.

Despite the battles to come, Bass notes that the progress last Friday's decision marked cannot be dismissed. Saving \$38.5 billion halfway through a fiscal year, which could compound to \$400 billion over 10 years, is no small feat, he said.

With more work to be done, Bass expressed confidence in Speaker Boehner and said that disorganized freshman members would come into their own as the next series of budget discussions begins. "People will learn," he said, "how to negotiate with each other."

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