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By Kayti Burt

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NORTH HAVERHILL - U.S. Representative Charlie Bass visited the Grafton County Complex to hear from the commissioners of his district. Among the issues raised: the Northern Pass transmission project, the health care system, and energy costs.

"If there's anything I can do at the federal level for a start, I'm here for you," said Bass to the commissioners, and they took him up on the offer.

Health care

Commissioner Ray Burton started the conversation off by asking Bass to do what he could about what he called over-regulations on nursing homes by the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). Burton called the regulations – that can even dictate the color of a resident's room – "very burdensome" on the county nursing home facility. The director of CMS is appointed by the president, and confirmed by the Senate. Burton said he had already been assured by Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Kelly Ayotte that they would be asking some tough questions come confirmation time, but he wanted to know what Bass could do on the matter.

Bass said he is in favor of shifting much of the responsibility of Medicare and Medicaid to the state level to those who have a better understanding of – and greater concern in – their own residents' needs.

"Things just don't seem to be going right in Washington, and [are] having an adverse impact on us at the local level," said Commissioner Omer Ahern. One of Ahern's specific concerns is about the health care system.

"We need to be able to have access, in my mind, to the free market system to provide competition," said Ahern. He is in favor of being able to purchase health insurance across state lines, which he believes would allow for greater competition and lower costs for the consumer. This is an issue the county will be dealing with in the near future as their current health care provider, Primex, will not be offering health insurance any longer starting in June of 2012.

Bass agrees that the health care system needs to change, and is in favor of repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which he says deals with access, but does not address cost.

"There's going to be a battle royale over this issue," said Bass, specifically over whether the government should regulate the cost or if it should be done in the market through competition. Bass supports the latter method.

Energy

Burton's second question concerned rising gas prices, and the energy crisis that fuels them. If

they continue to rise, he said, there will come a time when visits, such as the one made to the complex, will not be as feasible. Though the advent of the Internet has provided ample opportunities to communicate, "we're still human beings enjoying conversations face to face," he said. "We've got to do more with drilling oil in this country, using our own resources and our own sources of energy," said Burton.

Bass said a few bills that would better regulate offshore drilling are set to come before Congress in May. Bass believes that having the federal government regulate the oil companies will not solve the problem. He is in favor of talking about other kinds of energy, as well – everything from biomass to nuclear. Though it is difficult to talk about nuclear power with everything that has happened in Japan, Bass said, those plants were over 30 years old and there can certainly be a debate about safe nuclear energy.

Northern Pass

Later in the meeting, Burton noted the stand the commissioners have taken against the Northern Pass transmission project, which would construct a 140-mile power line through New Hampshire to transport hydro-power from Quebec to southern New England.

"The Northern Pass proposed transmission line is not going to go away," said Bass. "It's not just going to blow over."

Burton, who himself came out publicly against the project in December, said the commissioners are against using foreign sources of power, and would rather find the energy on a more local level, such as at the power plants in Bethlehem, Tamworth, and Alexandria.

"There is absolutely no need for the president of this country to allow foreign power when we have our own energy," added Burton.

Commissioner Michael Cryans clarified that his opposition comes from the potential environmental and property value damage the project could do, and that he believes America has a good working relationship with Canada.

"We do not see the project, at this point, as being acceptable," said Bass, noting that he and Ayotte publicly announced their opposition to the project as proposed on April 8. The announcement came in the form of a letter to the Department of Energy, urging it to look at alternative options for the plan.

Jobs

Bass said the key to solving the problems discussed – excluding the energy crisis – is in creating more jobs, and improving the economy, though he was impressed with Grafton County's low unemployment rate of 4.6 percent.

Cryans recognized the Dartmouth Regional Technical Center (DRTC) for its part in creating new jobs for the county. Since its construction in 2004, the DRTC has created 210 jobs and is

anticipating another 40 with the construction of its new wing. The facility has been funded, in small part, with \$282,000 in earmarked funds requested by Bass' predecessor, Paul Hodes.

"[Earmark is] a tough word, but I think there's a lot of good things that happen," said Cryans. "Bringing money back to the states is an important role that representatives do."

"Earmarks are not going to happen," said Bass, until Congress can get its "fiscal house in order."

Berlin's Federal Prison

"It's as frustrating to me that the money's not there to run it as it is to everybody else," said Bass about the federal prison in Berlin, which sits unused as a victim of the recent budget cuts. The prison cost \$276 million to construct, and could house 1300 inmates, but because of a lack of funding in the federal budget, cannot open. The facility costs \$4 million per year to maintain without inmates, and could bring 300 jobs to the struggling community.

Bass said the earliest funding could become available is in October, when the continuing resolution currently in effect will expire and the new fiscal year budget will begin. The continuing resolution allows for current programs to spend money at their current level or below, but does not allow for any funding of new programs, such as Berlin's federal prison.

Frustrations

Harold Brown, of Haverhill, the only member of the public present for the meeting, expressed a number of frustrations with Bass, and the way things are being run in Washington. Among other things, he asked Bass to recall the Patriot's Act, to cut military funding by a third, and to lower the debt ceiling.

"Your vote for the war and debt has nullified anything good you've done, and I know you've done a lot of good things," said Brown.

Bass said getting the country out of debt at this point is a balance between covering past government spending in order to stabilize the economy, and changing the government's spending habits. Bass also said he believed that military spending should be on the table for this debate, and that it is possible to cut the defense budget without affecting the country's military readiness.

"Right now, we can't afford the government that we have," said Bass.