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By Nancy Bean Foster

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MILFORD — When it comes to energy policy, businesses want the government to level the playing field so that everyone has a chance to compete, business people from the Souhegan Valley told U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass on Friday.

Bass, who has been touring the Second Congressional District and hosting roundtable discussions about energy policy and green jobs, stopped at Hitchiner Manufacturing in Milford on Friday morning to meet with members of the Souhegan Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Bass, who said he wasn't interested in talking, but rather listening, opened the floor to the group of small-business owners, executives and community organizers. Though each of the 30 or so people brought different views and concerns to the table, one overarching theme throughout the hour-long discussion was the need to either do away with government subsidies or to open them up to everyone involved in creating alternative energy strategies.

"We subsidize oil with our troops overseas," said Kevin Boette of Hendrix Wire and Cable, "when we should be subsidizing the creation of renewable energy over here."

John Roche said that the government should stop picking the "winners and losers" in the energy market by subsidizing one form of energy over another, as was the case with solar power in the 1970s, and should instead focus on the massive reserves of natural gas located underground across America.

For Roche, the free market should dictate what should be the direction Americans take to meet their energy needs.

Charlie Niebling, director of public affairs with New England Wood Pellet in Jaffrey, told Bass he'd like to see a "technology and fuel neutral policy that recognizes and rewards successful alternative energy," instead of having the government simply subsidize a few select fields while ignoring the rest.

Niebling said that the wood pellet industry is competing with companies that make cellulosic ethanol, a biofuel made from wood chips and other plant matter, but the ethanol folks have the upper hand because of tax incentives from the government.

"I want to see an end to subsidies for chosen energy pathways that are giving some industries an unfair advantage," said Niebling.

Bass said the issue of subsidies is a symptom of a "very dysfunctional federal process for encouraging energy development."

But leveling the playing field also means deregulation so that American companies can compete

with companies overseas, said Boette and Matt Boucher of Hollis Line Machine Co.

"We're developing the alternative energy technology and then sending it to countries overseas," said Boucher.

Those companies then create alternative energy systems using cheap foreign labor and then bring the systems back into the U.S. without paying any penalties, said Boette.

"We're not giving an equal playing field to the American worker," he said.