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By APRIL GUILMET

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SALEM – Some seniors took a brief pause from their bingo game Tuesday afternoon to ask some of the tougher questions when Second District Congressman Charles Bass made a brief stop at the Ingram Senior Center.

During a whirlwind tour of Salem yesterday, the congressman, joined by House Leader D.J. Bettencourt, also visited town hall, Central and North fire stations, the New Hampshire Employment Security office, and the town's public works department, after a morning stop at the Nashua National Fish Hatchery earlier that day.

Less than 24 hours after the Dow Jones Industrial Average was left reeling following a 630-point loss, the nation's credit rating appeared at the top of everyone's minds.

"Nobody should be surprised," Bass said during a brief interview in front of the local senior center. "It's something we knew was going to happen for a long time."

"Our debt is 80 percent of our GDP, versus 40 percent just several years ago," the congressman continued. "There are many underlying problems."

Several seniors spending the afternoon at the senior center yesterday seemed to have some specific concerns in mind.

"I'd really like to hear what his platform is," said Salem resident Mary Anne Clark. "I know we can't spend a dime if we don't have it."

Sitting across a table laden with bingo cards, fellow Salem resident Rose Nolan agreed, noting to her friend that the senior population is "currently the backbone of our nation."

"China owns us right now," she added. "I think in politics, you really have to compromise."

Bass said he wasn't surprised by his somewhat skeptical reception, noting that such impromptu visits are important to keep the communication flowing among constituents.

"I think that generally, folks are very worried about where America is headed and the economic crisis we're heading through right now," he said. "And a lot of what I do isn't about talking, but more about listening."

With that in mind, Bass said a main priority right now should be focus on the nation's debt limit and the creation of jobs.

"I think this has forced us to be responsible," he emphasized. "So now, we need to control the growth of our government. It won't happen in a week or in a month, but it can happen."

In New Hampshire, where the state's unemployment rates have fared somewhat better than other parts of the nation, Bass stressed the need for continued economic diversity, the ratification of free trade agreements and the importance now, more than ever, for the state to rein in its spending habits.