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By Edith Tucker

*The Berlin Reporter, September 7, 2011*

BERLIN — Congressman Charlie Bass told senior citizens gathered to eat their noon meal together on Wednesday at the Berlin Senior Center on Sullivan Street on the East Side that he "wants America to be around for his children and grandchildren." But, Bass warned, it is important to separate rhetoric from policy. "I've never voted against Social Security and Medicare," he said, stating specifically that he has never supported any change to benefits that would affect those aged 55 or over.

Patti Stolte, Director of the Tri-County Community Action Program (CAP) Elder Programs also introduced Councilor Ray Burton, state Sen. John Gallus, and Joe Costello, Tri-County CAP's new executive director. Rep. Robert Theberge and meal site coordinator Joanne Lakin of Gorham were also on hand.

Everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to those celebrating August birthdays, including Margaret Frenette whose birthday was on Aug. 15.

Afterwards, the Bass-Burton duo visited Tri-County CAP's headquarters in the former Grand Trunk Railroad station as part of their two-day informational tour. Costello said that the dozen or so division directors who were seated around a large conference table brought a wealth of experience, talent, knowledge and dedication to the agency that covers 44,000 square miles, employs 335 people, and enlists the support of 1,100 volunteers to operate 58 programs.

The agency is further tightening its belt in face of budget cuts at both the state and federal level, Costello said.

"I think everyone understands that we are facing a real crisis, and that we don't have the wherewithal needed to continue every federal program," Bass explained. "We will have to make difficult choices with a sense of balance and understanding without anyone being asked to make sacrifices disproportionately."

It could be, he said, that the federal government will operate under a Continuing Resolution for another year, which would very likely foreclose opening the federal Correctional Facility, which is built but has no inmates.

"Operating the Berlin prison is at the top of my Appropriations list, and I'm working with other members of the Congressional delegation to get it staffed," Bass said. "It's a bipartisan issue." Because what had become the traditional way of dealing with such issues — earmarking — is no longer deemed acceptable, Bass explained that he is working quietly.

Costello said he had recently been to a White House conference and is getting a handle on changes in the next round of Community Services Block Grants (CSBGs), which are important sources of funding of the agency's work.

"Cuts on Capitol Hill trickle down to our little towns," explained Jeanne Robillard, who heads up Tri-County CAP's Support Center at Burch House, a volunteer-supported organization that provides services and support to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in 17 towns in the Littleton area.

Town welfare costs will continue to rise if Tri-County CAP programs are substantially reduced, she said, noting that these local tax dollars are not usually spent as effectively as dollars available at the agency.

One director pointed out that, as administrators, they have been asked to accept pay cuts. Costello confirmed this harsh reality. Health insurance co-pays are also going up, meaning that some staff members won't be able to afford health insurance, Costello explained.

A couple of directors explained that cuts to the Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) programs are particularly disheartening, especially since children are becoming involved at ever-younger ages. AOD issues are also intertwined with mental health issues.

Sen. John Gallus noted that it had been a blow with the psychiatric unit was closed at the Androscoggin Valley Hospital. Tri-County CAP and the work it does is an important part of the state's safety net and is doing a great job dealing with the realities that face the North Country, Gallus said.

The weatherization program that has helped make 250 homes a year more energy efficient is facing funding cuts in March 2012, and 18 workers will lose their jobs and only 65 to 75 homes will be retrofitted each year. Bass explained that the effort, enlarged under the federal job stimulus program, was never intended to be an ongoing budget item, even though some 4,000 homes need this kind of retrofitting. "The layoffs are regrettable, but the program was not designed to be permanent," the congressman said.

Tri-County CAP's Housing and Economic Development Director, Max Makaitis, said that the "green light" given to constructing 75- megawatt biomass plant on the Burgess Pulp Mill site and the reopening of Gorham Paper and Tissue that has put over 100 workers back on that payroll, have made a difference.

Bass praised Makaitis' work in helping to keep the project alive. Burton pointed out that Tri-County CAP maintains remarkably low administrative costs. He offered to lend the push that his office can provide by helping speed reimbursement checks that the state owes to the agency to reduce its cash flow woes.