

Untitled document

By Barbara Tetreault

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BERLIN – A large crowd, many opposed to the requirement that religious-affiliated groups must provide coverage for birth control as part of their health insurance package, greeted U.S. Congressman Charlie Bass at a town hall meeting Saturday.

Aware that many had turned out to discuss the insurance issue, Bass raised the topic in his opening remarks.

The Peterborough Republican said he opposes both the original requirement and the compromise worked out by the Obama administration. The regulation initially required religious-affiliated groups such as charities, hospitals, and universities, to provide health insurance coverage for contraceptives, starting in 2013. Churches, themselves, are exempt from the new regulation.

Faced with opposition, President Obama worked out a compromise that would require the insurance companies to pay for contraceptives, relieving religious groups from paying for birth control that they oppose.

Bass said he opposes the compromise because it does not solve the issue of birth control coverage but simply ensures the employer doesn't pay for it. He said he expects a resolution will be entered in the House opposing any mandate requiring employers and insurers to provide coverage that conflicts with their religious beliefs or moral convictions. Bass said he will support the resolution.

Rev. Kyle Stanton, associate pastor at Good Shepherd Parish, said he was concerned that religious freedom, which he said defines this country, may be lost. He said he appreciated the congressman's support for maintaining that freedom.

One woman complained the Obama administration's regulation is stripping organizations of their constitutional rights.

"Birth control has no place in the health care plan for religious organizations," she said.

Nicole Plourde said Catholics should not be held hostage to President Obama's beliefs. She said it is important that citizens be able to live according to their conscience.

Paul Martineau told Bass he opposes abortion and believes God is punishing the country because abortions are allowed.

"Abortion is killing the innocent," Martineau said.

Bass replied that he is pro-choice, believing that the federal government should not be

mandating on the issue in either direction. He said families, churches, and communities, and not the federal government, should make decisions on abortion.

Bass said his position on abortion is consistent with his belief that too much power is vested in Washington. He said since World War I, the balance of power between the federal government and the states has shifted to the federal government.

"Washington just controls too much," he said.

Bass said he supports extending unemployment benefits set to expire at the end of this month but said he also is in favor of a Republican proposal to require drug screening and a high school equivalency diploma. The congressman said he saw nothing wrong with requiring recipients to clean up their lives and improve their education.

Carl Gagnon said he was required to undergo drug testing when he was hired for his current job. He said he believes people receiving unemployment benefits or welfare assistance should have to prove they are ready for employment.

Bass said he is also in favor of extending the payroll tax cut but believes the extension should be offset by cuts in spending and programs.

Noting the political tension in Washington, Bass said House Republicans are trying to change the direction of the country and reduce spending. He complained that the Senate has refused to submit a budget for over 1,000 days.

With two children of his own, Bass said he wants to make sure there are jobs for the future generation. He said it is also important to protect Medicare and Social Security.

"We have to think about tomorrow," he said.

In response to questions about the inability of ATV riders to work out a land swap with the Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge to allow development of an ATV trail from Berlin to Pittsburg, Bass said he will have his North Country liaison, Rep. Gene Chandler, look into the matter.

Bass said he believes the national economy is improving but argued some of the Obama administration policies delayed that turn-around from occurring earlier. In particular, he signaled out the national health insurance act, known as Obamacare, as having a negative effect on the country's economic recovery.

Locally, Bass pointed to the re-opening of the Gorham Paper and Tissue plant, the construction of the Burgess BioPower biomass plant, and the funding of the federal prison as good signs. Bass noted he was involved with the biomass plant while he was out of office.

The congressman picked up a key endorsement Saturday when Berlin Mayor Paul Grenier announced he was backing Bass for re-election. Grenier, a Democrat, said Bass had worked hard in the House to secure the funding to open the federal prison in Berlin.

"I consider Congressman Bass my friend. I consider Congressman Bass Berlin's friend," Grenier said.