

Untitled document

By JAKE BERRY

*The Nashua Telegraph, April 4, 2012*

Five months ago, U.S. Rep. Charles Bass joined more than 100 colleagues calling for Congress to work together to solve the country's deficit woes.

But last week, the New Hampshire congressman stood nearly alone as the House of Representatives told the so-called "Go-Big coalition" to go home.

The coalition, made up of Democrat and Republican lawmakers from the House and Senate, worked for months to craft a budget compromise to lower the federal deficit. The plan, modeled on the recommendations of a bipartisan deficit reduction committee, proposed to reduce the federal deficit by \$4 trillion through a combination of spending cuts and tax increases.

The House soundly rejected the plan last week, voting it down by a 382-38 count.

"Obviously, it's disappointing," Bass said Tuesday in an interview with The Telegraph editorial board. "But it's been my experience that if you don't try, you can't get it going,"

Bass, 60, was one of eight sponsors of the plan.

"The time has come" for compromise, Bass said. "Americans are clamoring for us to start working together to solve this problem."

With his budget compromise defeated, Bass joined most of his Republican colleagues in supporting the budget proposal crafted by U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis.

The budget, which passed the House on Thursday in a 228-191 vote, meets some of Bass' key principles. It proposes to cut spending and keep taxes down, he said. But it fails to bridge the growing gap between the two parties enough to address the country's major issues.

"I voted for the Ryan budget because, in principle, it does what I want it to do," Bass said. "But we're reaching the point where we're in an impossible situation. I believe members of Congress have to start promoting the agenda of this country."

Among the pressing fiscal issues facing the country, heated debates over the payroll tax deduction and federal debt ceiling are likely to come up again, and the Bush-era tax cuts are scheduled to expire at the end of the year. If allowed to lapse, these issues could leave Americans facing the largest tax hike in the country's history at a time when they can least afford to pay it, Bass said.

Still, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have shown little willingness to put aside their differences to accomplish anything.

"The primary reason why most average voters are disgruntled and disappointed with the performance of their elected officials in Washington is because of the fact that we can't solve our nation's problems," Bass said. "I've had enough of the brinkmanship and the posturing, on both sides, by the way."

Bass is accustomed to reaching across party lines. The congressman, who previously served from 1996 to 2006, has long held a reputation as a moderate Republican willing to work with Democrats. He returned to the House of Representatives last year after defeating Concord attorney Ann McClane Kuster in the 2010 election. The two are on track to face off again this fall.

Bass has long held a pro-choice stance in opposition to the Republican Party's position on the abortion debate, and he agrees with members of both parties about the need to remove American troops from Afghanistan.

"We're in the wrong country," he said. "Pakistan is where the problem is."

Still, he stands in strong opposition to the controversial Affordable Care Act, which has divided lawmakers since it went into effect two years ago and stands to become a central issue in this fall's elections.

The health care reform law went before the U.S. Supreme Court last week, which will rule on the law's individual insurance mandate, among other provisions.

If the high court shoots down the mandate, it will force lawmakers from both parties to come together once again to try to salvage the beneficial parts, Bass said, including provisions to require insurance companies to cover children with pre-existing conditions and to include young adults up to 26 on their parents insurance.

Without a willingness to compromise, Congress doesn't stand to gain ground on health care or the economy, among other issues plaguing the country, Bass said.

"When you offer to compromise, that doesn't mean you are aggregating or giving up your principles," he said. "If you look back in history, all of the great accomplishments of prior Congresses have been based upon men and women who had very, very strong principles, but were willing to listen to one another and resolve problems. ...That's where we need to be today."