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By Alex Bloom

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SALEM — Environmental activists peppered U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass with questions about carbon dioxide regulation during a town hall meeting yesterday.

About 50 people crowded into the Salem Town Hall to hear from the Republican congressman, who took questions on illegal immigration, the national debt, health care, education, and other topics.

But climate change and regulation of greenhouse gases dominated most of the discussion, with members of Environment New Hampshire, the Sierra Club and other organizations asking Bass to approve of the Environmental Protection Agency's approach to regulating carbon dioxide.

Bass voted Feb. 19 in favor of a bill that prevents the EPA from enforcing carbon dioxide regulations on power plants and other industrial sources.

Bass, a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said his vote reflects his belief that Congress should approve those types of regulations, rather than a governmental agency, especially after efforts to pass legislation on greenhouse gas regulation stalled in the previous Congress.

"I do not believe the agency — the EPA — should have command and control authority to implement a piece of legislation that failed in the Congress over the last two years," he said. "As a congressman, I think it is a mistake to allow an agency to do what Congress failed to do without the Congress' approval."

Jessica O'Hare, a program associate at Environment New Hampshire in Concord, said she realizes Bass has to make tough decisions, but that the EPA protects public health. She said the EPA's ability to regulate carbon dioxide helps reduce smog pollution and improves conditions for people with asthma.

"If you don't deal with carbon, you're going to have some serious effects on public health," O'Hare said.

Bass also told the audience he believes Congress must raise the ceiling on the national debt, pointing out that not raising the ceiling could damage the economy.

Bass said Congress should "avoid a government shutdown at all costs." He supports a House Republican-backed bill that will keep the government running for another two weeks and would cut \$4 billion from current spending.

Bass wants to get a resolution passed to keep the government running so Congress can get started on a more involved budget process that looks into deeper cuts.

"It's not our fault that we inherited a Congress that is almost halfway through the fiscal year without a single appropriation for the budget," he said. "But we've got to deal with the hand that we're dealt."

Nashua resident Ned Hunter attended the town hall meeting to express his point of view about the national debt, but also to support town hall-style meetings.

"I believe in the town hall," said Hunter, who explained that he attended partly because of what happened in Arizona. "We should be able to have mature debates with different points of view."