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By Sarah Trefethen

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JAFFREY — The U.S. Congress was not in the wrong in events leading to the downgrade last week of the country's credit rating, according to Rep. Charles F. Bass, R-N.H., and he remains optimistic that a seemingly bitterly divided government can find a solution to the nation's money problems.

"There is certainly reason to be concerned about the financial health of the United States," Bass said Thursday during a stop in Jaffrey. "There is not a legitimate reason to believe that the process is somehow inappropriate, because it's never been any different in 238 years."

Credit rating agency Standard & Poor's announced late last Friday that it had changed the country's AAA credit rating to AA+, indicating the agency has lost confidence in the country's ability to pay its debts.

Explaining the downgrade, the agency said it worried that members of the two major political parties might not be able to agree on how to manage the country's finances.

But that concern indicates a failure to appreciate how the government works, Bass said.

"There are very few people at Standard & Poor's who have ever held any position of responsibility in public office," he said.

The U.S. government was designed to encourage debate, and budget discussions are always contentious, he said. "When Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner are in perfect agreement about anything, the American people better watch out."

Bass, who represents New Hampshire's 2nd District in Washington, spent Thursday morning in the Monadnock Region as part of a district-wide tour promoting job creation.

But at a breakfast meeting of the Jaffrey-Rindge Rotary Club it was the nation's economy and the recent debate over raising the federal debt limit that dominated the discussion.

Taking questions from the Rotarians, Bass said Social Security and Medicare "are a joint partnership between the U.S. government and its citizens, and I think we have an obligation to preserve and protect both of these programs — not only for current recipients but for future generations."

But the government must cut spending for the sake of the economy, he said.

"The only way we can get out of this recession is to figure out how to live within our means and create an environment in which businesses can thrive and hire people," he said.

But while he does not support increasing tax rates, he said, there is "enormous potential" in tax reform.

"I say to my critics ... show me the money on the spending side, show me the courage to go in a direction where we can have a balanced budget in less than 15 years, and I'll put everything on the table," he said.

Bass said he believes the bipartisan "super committee" on deficit reduction will work out a plan that Congress will be able to vote into law. The 12-member committee was created as part of Congress' recent deal to raise the debt ceiling.

He is, however, disappointed that the deal did not include plans to add a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

"I am convinced that if the founding fathers had had any idea that we could possibly end up where we are today — if they could have even dreamed of it — they would have had that provision in the Constitution to begin with," he said.

Bass also met Thursday with senior leaders of Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene to discuss the Vision 2020 Healthiest Community Initiative.

He requested another meeting to talk further about ways to reimburse hospitals pursuing preventive medicine and healthy living, according to a news release from the hospital.