

[Rob Mitchell, Rutland Herald](#)

Congressman Peter Welch heard concerns about spending, spending cuts, regulation and infrastructure at a meeting with about 20 constituents over coffee at the Rutland Fire Department headquarters Wednesday morning.

He told them he thought Washington could benefit by taking a lesson from two former Vermont leaders, Republican Gov. Dick Snelling and Democratic Speaker of the House Ralph Wright, who put aside their differences to balance the budget in the early 1990s.

"Both sides put something on the table," Welch said. "I think we can do that in this country. I see the budget as a practical problem, not a political one ... I actually do think that we have to be spending some money on infrastructure."

Current federal budget negotiations focus on only about 12 percent of the overall budget, he said, meaning recent cuts passed by the House of Representatives would not make a big dent in the deficit. He said he'd seen a piece of Rutland's water system that was installed during the Civil War, and federal money spent on that type of infrastructure, along with railway and airport improvements in the Rutland region, was worthwhile and made sense to frugal Vermonters.

"What are the big ticket items that we're not talking about?" asked John Weatherhogg, pastor at Grace Congregational Church in Rutland. "Is it time to rethink our military strategy globally?"

"The Defense budget is typically focused on this weapon system or that weapons system," Welch said, pointing out that this is too-incremental an approach to cutting a budget that is about \$700 billion. "Do we really have to have that many troops in South Korea? Do we need them in Japan? We may, because of North Korea. The point is we need to raise these questions. The only way we will attack the military budget is by asking these strategic questions."

Health care costs are also a major concern, Welch said, which dwarf the rest of the budget. But the current climate in Washington does not allow for serious debate on these real issues, he said.

"We've got financial problems. We've got to balance the budget. This is not optional," he said. "Folks who've worked all their life, we've got to meet these obligations. (Fixing it) is going to give people heartburn."

"I don't agree with him politically," said Jim Hall, a Rutland Town selectman who asked about drilling for oil in the U.S. and the country's precarious financial situation. "But he is our congressman, the only one we've got. It's nice to see that he takes the time to hear what people's thoughts are. But the federal government does not create jobs."

Welch also met with constituents for a roundtable discussion on rural broadband progress at Poultney Elementary School on Wednesday afternoon. He saw first-hand how grants from federal stimulus money are helping establish a broadband infrastructure in 24 rural communities across the state through the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project.

The congressman visited the fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms at the elementary school, which received 52 netbooks as part of a broadband pilot project partnership with e-Vermont and Digital Wish.

Kristin Caliguiri, principal at Poultney Elementary School, said it was a great opportunity to integrate academics with technology, and students and teachers embraced the project from the beginning.

"When you see the kids, they are so excited and they realize what it means for their future because they know how technology will be good for their careers," she said.

Welch said the more students take advantage of broadband, the importance will widen to the homes and businesses in small rural communities. He said projects such as the one in Poultney is the kind of work that needs to be done across the state.

"We know we have to get the state wired," Welch said. "It's amazing seeing those kids out there (on those computers)."