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With every fill-up these days, Chris Viet of Morrisville wonders where gas prices are headed next.

"I'm a little nervous," he said, pumping fuel at a Mobil station in Montpelier Monday. "You look at the world and it seems like in any crisis they can find a way to raise the price of gas."

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch says he hears a lot of that unease these days, from small business owners, individuals, even municipal government leaders struggling to afford gasoline in a tough economy.

Gasoline has spiked nearly \$1 a gallon since last fall. The U.S. Department of Energy says pump prices rose 40 cents a gallon in just the last month.

"We do need some short-term relief," Welch told reporters at the Montpelier Public Works Garage.

The Vermont Democrat amplified his earlier recommendation that President Obama release at least 30 million barrels of oil from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, with two additional legislative initiatives he thinks will make a real difference.

Welch said his "STOP Act" would eliminate a loophole that taxes gains among Wall Street energy speculators at rates far lower than most everyone else, thereby discouraging what he called "rampant" speculation in the oil futures markets.

Welch also believes Congress should pass tough new penalties convicted of energy price gouging.

"It's a shot across the bow to speculators, letting them know that the US government will stand up and do what it can to help American consumers and small businesses," Welch said.

Bellows Falls fuel oil dealer Sean Cota thinks it might just have the desired effect.

"I think it is a good idea," Cota said upon hearing Welch's proposal. "I think releasing the petroleum reserve, even for a short period of time, will put a shock through this market that will break it. It's a bubble now. It's a ponzi scheme."

Welch argues previous U.S. Presidents, of both parties, have released small slivers of the nation's 750 million barrel reserve (SPR) at key times over the last two decades. In every case, Welch said, retail gasoline prices fell soon afterward.

But it will take time. So far, Welch has only a handful of co-sponsors in the House.

In his most recent public statement last Friday, President Barack Obama remained lukewarm over the notion of tapping the SPR, at least right now.

As Tom Hitchins waited for his tank to fill ahead of a long drive from Montpelier to his home in Maine, he pondered Welch's plan of attack.

He had his doubts.

Perhaps the \$3.67 a gallon pump price he was paying is the 'new normal' he said.

"We've been getting off great for a long time," he said. "Maybe we're just going to have to change our habits a little bit."