

[By Bob Kinzel](#)

(Host) Congressman Peter Welch says GOP leaders in the House are "playing politics" with a federal disaster relief bill that would help many northeastern states, including Vermont.

Republican leaders say any additional money for the Federal Emergency Management Agency must be cut from other programs. Welch is strongly opposed to that approach.

VPR's Bob Kinzel reports.

(Kinzel) Late Thursday, the U.S. Senate gave its approval to a plan to provide FEMA with an additional 6.9 billion dollars to help states recover from damages caused by tropical storm Irene.

But the legislation faces an uncertain future in the House because Republican leaders want to reduce funding levels in the bill and they're insisting that additional budget cuts be implemented to pay for the package.

Congressman Peter Welch says this approach is a significant departure from tradition:

(Welch) "The budget politics in the House are really nightmarish. ... In the House the Republican leadership is saying that they want - quote - an offset. That is to take money from somewhere else in order to put it into disaster relief. And that is a thorny problem. It's a decision that leadership makes. I disagree with it because I think an emergency really is a separate category."

(Kinzel) Welch is the chairman of a newly created bipartisan "Irene Caucus" that's made up of 55 members from states that have experienced a lot of damage from Irene:

(Welch) "Our unifying principle is, 'Look, our folks have been affected by an act of God and we can help with an Act of Congress and we're determined to get the relief money back to our districts so people can continue to help themselves.' We actually, as a consensus, do not believe that there should have to be an offset because it is a natural disaster."

(Kinzel) In the end, Welch says he'll vote for the offsets because the bill is so important to Vermont.

(Welch) "I would. I've got to do whatever is required to address the emergency. In my view it's a dangerous precedent. We should be willing to get out there and help and reach into our pockets to help our neighbors."

(Kinzel) The measure is expected to be on the House floor for debate in the middle of next week.

For VPR News I'm Bob Kinzel in Montpelier.