

[By Randolph Holhut](#)

Citing a need to crack down on unregulated spending in political campaigns, U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., unveiled a pair of proposals at the River Garden last week.

In his visit on March 2, Welch called on the Internal Revenue Service to investigate whether nonprofit 501(c)(4) organizations affiliated with so-called Super PACs — such as Crossroads GPS, the Karl Rove-backed group spending millions of dollars in campaigns across the country — are in violation of federal law and IRS regulations.

Groups qualifying for nonprofit tax-exempt status are generally prohibited by law from engaging in political activity.

"We have got a lot of nonprofit organizations [that are] really political organizations masquerading as nonprofits," he said. "The letter that I'm going to be circulating to my colleagues is calling on the IRS to do its job. Don't give tax-exempt status to essentially political organizations."

Welch also called on President Obama to use his constitutional authority to fill five openings on the six-member Federal Election Commission (FEC) during the next recess of the United States Senate.

Senate Republicans have blocked the Obama administration from filling vacancies on the FEC, leaving the panel unable to do its work effectively. In a letter to Obama, Welch is urging him to fill these five seats so the FEC can immediately get back to work policing the new campaign landscape.

That landscape was formed by the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission case in 2009. In a 5-to-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that corporations have unlimited rights under the First Amendment to spend as much money as they please on political campaigns.

Critics of the court say the decision wiped away nearly a century of legal precedent, laws that have kept corporate money out of elections.

Supporters say that the court merely upheld the First Amendment right to free speech for corporations, and that limits on campaign contributions are effectively limits on free speech.

The case has sparked a debate over the idea of corporate personhood — that a corporation has the same legal rights as people — and has opponents of the Citizens United decision pushing for a constitutional amendment that would overturn the Supreme Court's ruling and enshrine the principle that money does equal free speech.

More than 50 Vermont towns — including Brattleboro, Marlboro and Putney — put corporate personhood measures on their respective Town Meeting warrants this year.

On Friday, Welch praised the efforts of Brattleboro Selectboard Vice Chair Dora Bouboulis, who led the effort to put a corporate personhood question on the Brattleboro warrant.

"I myself have been working on the issue of corporate personhood for years and support a constitutional amendment and I'm thrilled that [Welch] is working on that," said Bouboulis. "I think it's a good step in the right direction to begin addressing the issue of corporate spending in political campaigns."

Supporters of a constitutional amendment have an uphill battle. To amend the Constitution, it takes two-thirds majority approval in both the U.S. House and Senate, as well as approval from three-quarters of the nation's state legislatures.

Welch said he believe that the Town Meeting votes around the state will have a positive effect on the debate.

"It's grassroots efforts that will ultimately make a difference," he said. "A lot of good things happen at Town Meeting."

He cited as an example the votes that were taken in 1982 and 1983 at town meetings around the state urging the U.S. government to seek a deal with the Soviet Union to freeze the number of nuclear missiles in each country's arsenal.

Those votes attracted global attention and have been credited as playing an important role in igniting the nuclear disarmament efforts of the 1980s.

To Welch, the issue of corporate money in politics is clear-cut, and is his motivation for co-sponsoring three constitutional amendments that would overturn Citizens United.

"Corporations shouldn't be allowed to write multi-million-dollar checks to influence an election," he said. "It's poisoning our political process."

The event at the River Garden was part of a morning visit to Brattleboro.

Earlier, Welch stopped at Vermont Circuits Inc. After his River Garden appearance, he stopped at the Brattleboro Area Drop In Center to leave a donation of groceries for the food shelf and to visit briefly with volunteers and clients.