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Stupak meets Bay Countyans and vice versa

Citizens more interested in domestic issues than coming war against Iraq

Tuesday, February 18, 2003

By Crystal Harmon
TIMES WRITER

The United States government could launch a massive bombing raid on Iraq within the week, U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak predicted Monday.

But the 50 constituents gathered at Williams Township Hall to meet the 1st District Democrat were more eager to talk about gas prices, jobs and a federal government that some say is too easy on corporate crooks and too tough on beachfront property owners.

Stupak, a former state trooper and lawyer from Menominee who's been in Congress for a decade, is spending this week getting to know the people and places in his newly expanded 31-county district.

Stupak opposes waging war on Iraq, saying four other countries - North Korea, Iran, Syria and Yemen - pose more of a threat. But President Bush's single-minded obsession with Saddam Hussein has left the United States on the verge of war.

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"Bush doesn't know how to play poker," Stupak said in an interview with The Times. "He threw all his cards down, and now, France and Germany are calling our bluff and there's no way to get out gracefully."

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Stupak said Bush is hell-bent on revenge for the Sept. 11 terror attacks, and also has the interests of big oil companies in mind as he launches headlong into a conflict without support of the United Nations.

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"I think we should exhaust all possible means first," before waging war, Stupak said. "We should not go unilaterally."

But he predicted that the U.S. government will bomb Iraq from the air, "sooner, not later," followed by a massive invasion of ground troops. And even if the dictator is deposed within days, that won't be the end of the conflict.

"Even if we topple Saddam Hussein, will still end up having to be there - along with Great Britain - for 10 or 20 years," Stupak said.

Stupak said Washington, D.C., is bracing for an attack, and bomb-sniffing dogs, helicopters and even special police dressed in black and toting AK-47s have become part of the Capitol Hill scene.

Despite the growing tension abroad, many attendees at the Williams Hall town hall meeting came with domestic issues on their minds.

Michael Adams, of Pinconning, drew a smattering of applause when he asked what the government was going to do to stop trash from Canada from being trucked into Michigan.

Stupak said that trash has been deemed "commerce," and it's difficult for the government to regulate how private landfill owners do business.

From abortion funding to veterans' benefits, Stupak fielded questions and heard comments on an array of topics. Here's what he said:

On disagreements between the U.S. Corps of Engineers and homeowners on beach maintenance: "They (the Corps) are going to clearly define what you can and cannot do, and they're going to lighten up a little bit. They've been heavy-handed."

On skyrocketing gas prices: "It's called gettin' while the

gettin's good. ... I call it gouging."

On guns: "I'm basically pro-gun. The NRA and I disagreed on background checks for people buying guns at gun shows - I support them."

On alleged wrongdoing by corporate leaders, from Enron executives to Martha Stewart to Kmart, which will now be handled by the executive branch rather than Congress: "Basically, they're gonna walk."

Stupak updated the crowd on the Democrats' plan to boost the economy - a plan Stupak said would cost half of what Bush's proposed tax cuts would cost and would have more immediate benefits.

Democrats would invest \$338 billion in infrastructure projects around the nation, focusing on port security, highway improvements, bridges and waterways. But that plan's not likely to pass the Republican-controlled Congress, Stupak said.

Instead, Bush's tax cuts, which Stupak said help people profiting from the stock market, will be put into effect.

William Wegener of Williams Township said he was glad he attended the hour-long forum and enjoyed meeting his new congressman.

"I wanted to hear what he had to say," Wegener said. "I enjoyed very much the comments I heard tonight."

Stupak's expansive 1st District grew even larger as of Jan. 3, when parts of Bay County, as well as Arenac, Iosco, Gladwin and Ogemaw - were added under a redistricting plan.

His wife, Laurie, is mayor of Menominee, and they have a son who attends Michigan State University.

Stupak said he schedules many town hall meetings in his vast district - which represents nearly half of Michigan's land mass and is the largest congressional district east of the Mississippi River.

"When I cast a vote I want to make sure it reflects the wishes of my constituents," Stupak said.

The town hall meetings will continue tonight, at West Branch City Hall, from 5:30-6:30 p.m.

From 5:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Stupak will host a forum at the East Tawas City Hall. And Thursday, he plans a meeting from 5:30-6:30 p.m. at the Chippewa County Courthouse in Sault Ste. Marie.

- Crystal Harmon covers Bay County courts and politics for The Times. She may be reached at 894-9643.

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