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Murtha faces political newcomer

By Patty Yauger , Herald-Standard

U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha faces a political newcomer as he seeks his 18th term in Congress.

Republican candidate, William Russell, is challenging Murtha, a Democrat. Both men are from Johnstown.

Murtha met this week with members of the Herald-Standard Editorial Board to discuss his views on various issues facing the 12th Congressional District, the nation and the world.

Financial industry bailout and the national economy

With the numbers on Wall Street continuing to decline, despite the injection of nearly \$900 billion by Congress last week to stem the credit disaster, Murtha said that the matter is the "biggest crisis" he has witnessed since being elected in 1971.

"I'm not sure if this latest bailout is going to have the effect that we hope it will have," he said. "I don't know what this stems from; there are all kind of economists talking about different things."

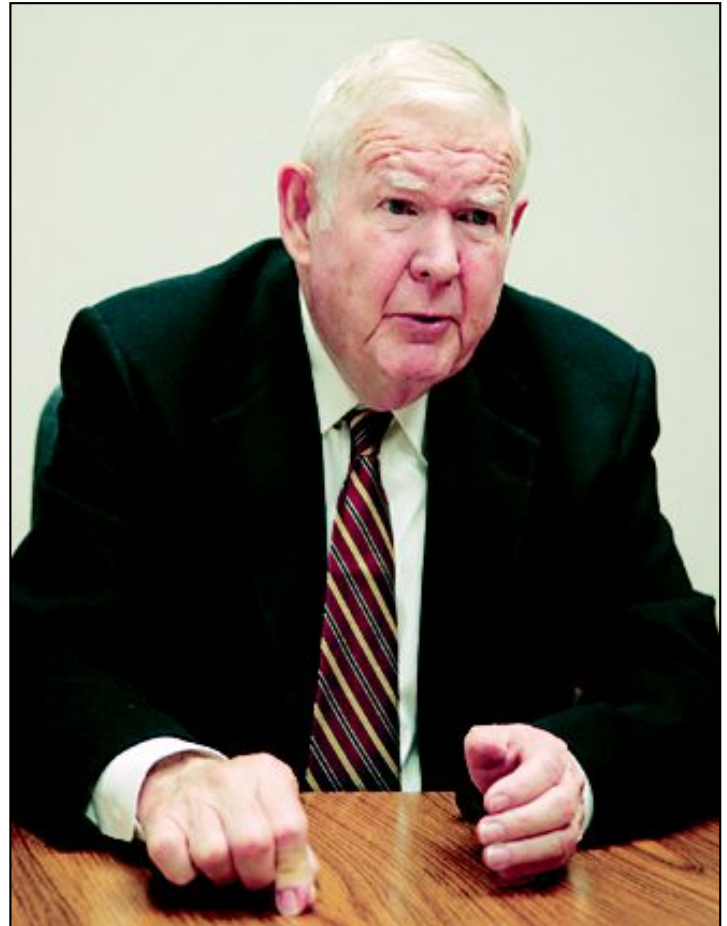
Murtha speculated that the stock market could rebound when the measures are implemented by the U.S. Treasury Department.

"We passed what we thought was a package that would loosen the credit," he said. "What more we have to do, I don't know."

One solution, he said is to reduce the budget deficit. "I vote against most of the tax cuts," he said. "I think we're going the wrong direction."

"When (Pres. Bill) Clinton left office we had a \$250 billion surplus and now there is a deficit and it has increased substantially."

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U.S. Congressman John Murtha talks about issues with the Herald-Standard Editorial Board in Uniontown last week. Ed Cope/Herald-Standard

Contributing

to the budget deficit, said Murtha is the monthly \$10 billion price tag of the war in Iraq and \$2 billion in Afghanistan.

Murtha said that the early days of bi-partisanship no longer take place and there are many issues that will need the two parties to come together.

"It used to be that you would argue in the daytime; disagree with the policy, but in the evening you liked people," he said. "Today, it is bitter partisanship, that carries well beyond policy differences in the House of Representatives.

"We can't solve any of the problems without bi-partisanship. We face Social Security, Medicare and health-care issues and they can not be resolved without bi-partisanship."

Iraq

While he opposes the war in Iraq, Murtha said he remains a staunch supporter of the soldiers serving on the battlefield.

"Nobody has done more to make sure the troops had what they needed," he said. "Not only in combat, but when they come home."

Murtha said that soldiers and Marines along with their families are overextended with long and multiple deployments.

While he voted to go into Iraq, Murtha said that in hindsight, the decision was his "biggest mistake."

"They weren't a threat to our national security," he said.

A timeline for troop withdrawal is important to the U.S. and Iraq, said Murtha.

"We need to force the Iraqis to take control; to take responsibility for this," he said. "When we do it for them, there is no incentive.

"When you have timelines, they then have the incentive to do it themselves."

Murtha said he believes that the Iraqis should be paying a fair share of the war expense, but they have refused.

"They have a \$79 billion surplus, we have a deficit," he said. "This thing has been bungled since the start."

Victory in Iraq, said Murtha, will take place when the citizens are overseeing their own destiny. However, it will not be without conflict, because of the differing factions.

"They may be fighting among themselves, but that is something we can't solve," he said. "It is very fragile at this time."

There has been some progress, he said.

"Tactics have changed; we're not breaking down doors the way we were before and our intelligence is better and the Iraqis are doing better for themselves, so it's time for us to get out," he said.

Lawsuit

Murtha declined to comment on the recent lawsuit filed by U.S. Marine Lance Cpl. Justin Sharratt of Canonsburg that alleges the congressman had denied him of his constitutional rights of the presumption of innocence and of due process. The complaint's allegations stem from Murtha's public statements, prior to the trial in the 2006 incident that members of Sharratt's unit had killed "innocent civilians in cold blood."

A military court has since exonerated Sharratt and six others. An eighth Marine is awaiting trial

However, he said that 24 people were killed and no weapons were found at the Haditha site, which, to him, indicated there was "no security threat" to the Marine unit.

"Since I spoke out, the procedures have been changed substantially," he said. "I had a number of criticisms about what was going on in Iraq at the time.

"We were breaking down doors and we shouldn't be. If we are going to win this battle in Iraq, we're going to have to win the hearts and minds of the people."

Afghanistan

Murtha said that he is not convinced there should be additional U.S. troops sent to Afghanistan, but will make a trip to the region next month to more fully assess the situation.

In a trip to Afghanistan last year he found the area to be "very primitive," with no roadway infrastructure or central government.

Neighboring Pakistan also is problematic, he said, with its possession of nuclear weapons and its government prohibiting troops from crossing the border.

Murtha said he has recommended to the Obama campaign that it be "very careful" with statements concerning a troop shift from Iraq to Afghanistan.

"(I've said) you better have a plan," said Murtha. "Victory in Iraq to me is letting them handle it themselves; in Afghanistan, I'm not sure how to handle it."

It is critical, he added, to restore U.S. credibility and confidence with allies.

"Today, we need our allies; we can't do this by ourselves," he said.

Opponent allegations

Murtha said Russell's allegations that his earmarks for the district does more harm than good overall, are untrue.

"I do everything I can to help the district," he said. "They criticize me in Washington for bringing jobs to the district and spending money on infrastructure.

"I've probably spent more on sewerage and water than any other individual in Congress, because I know how important it is; you can't find jobs, fill jobs or bring jobs (without infrastructure).

"I don't apologize for bringing money into the district to create jobs. I do everything I can."

Murtha also denies that his earmark designees and others are unable to criticize his policies.

"I have not found people to be afraid," he said. "We get suggestions and criticism all the time and we pay attention to them; we received hundreds of calls from people who said they did not want a bailout.

"I knew that we had to do something and I used my judgment and we passed legislation that I hope causes some stability in the marketplace."

Local economy

As the area's federal representative, Murtha said he has and will continue to assist with sewerage, water and highway infrastructure to draw business to the region.

"I'm trying to attract the defense industry to this area all the time," he said. "I never stop working that issue.

"We've been pretty successful."

Murtha said with the aging population of the area, he continues to help hospitals through federal funding, along with providing funding for National Guard facilities.

"We're trying to make sure we get our share of federal money for the taxpayers," he said.

Murtha said that it is "frustrating" that southwestern Pennsylvania is lagging behind other areas in the state in attracting business.

"Every time we do something it doesn't have the impact we would like to see," he said. "We lose jobs, that we shouldn't have lost and that's part of the problem."

Murtha said that he is concerned that Sony is looking to relocate to Mexico, which would translate into another economic blow to the region.

The region's economy may be on the upswing, said Murtha, with the furtherance of clean-coal technology.

Legislation, supported by him and West Virginia representatives, has been introduced for consideration.

"We have to reduce our dependence on foreign oil," he said, adding that he is also a proponent of safe drilling for oil. "We'll eventually burn coal and that may be our salvation."

Free-trade agreements

Murtha said that he continues his stance in opposition of NAFTA and other free-trade agreements.

"I've always been against NAFTA, because I think it hurts our American workers," he said. "It is a world economy and you have to recognize that."

Presidential election

During the primary election Murtha supported U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-NY, to be the Democratic nominee for president. Since her loss, he has supported Obama.

"Barack Obama is smart," he said. "He's the most organized guy I have ever seen.

"He still won't overcome some people. He can win Fayette County."

Like Pennsylvania, poll numbers in typically Republican states of North Carolina and Virginia, also show Obama leading or within the margin of error of Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain.

"The momentum is in his direction," said Murtha. "We need a change; the public has come to the conclusion we can't have four more years of (Pres. George W.) Bush."

The congressional district encompasses portions of Allegheny, Cambria, Indiana, Somerset, Washington and Westmoreland counties and all of Greene County.

In Fayette County, the 12th District includes the City of Uniontown, Wards 1,2,3 and 6 of the City of Connellsville; Brownsville and Bullskin, Franklin, German, Jefferson, Lower Tyrone, Luzerne, Menallen, Perry, Redstone, Saltlick, Upper Tyrone and Washington townships; Districts 2,3 and 4 of Dunbar Township; Districts 3 and 4 of Georges Township; Districts 1,2,4 and 5 of North Union Township; Districts 1 and 2 of South Union Township; District 2 of Springhill Township and Belle Vernon, Brownsville, Dawson, Dunbar, Everson, Fayette City, Masontown, Newell, Perryopolis, Point Marion and Vanderbilt boroughs.



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The banner features a green and orange color scheme. On the left is a logo for Uniontown to Brownsville with icons for a person, a house, and a tree. On the right is a circular logo for the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission and a 'CLICK HERE' link.

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