

Delegates give takes on Wall Street, waterboarding, witch hunts

BY JOHN GOLDEN
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From health care to torture, Westchester's congressional delegates last week gave their views on national issues that a Westchester County Association audience variously received with vigorous applause and barely muffled derision.

Three Democrats from the House of Representatives – Eliot Engel, 17th District, Nita Lowey, 18th District, and John Hall, 19th District – and an unannounced drop-by guest, Sen. Charles Schumer, the Brooklyn Democrat, all rallied behind President Obama and his economic stimulus program, while acknowledging its success at reversing the deep recession is not certain. Schumer offered brief remarks before the WCA's annual Report from Washington luncheon, while the others fielded questions in front of a ballroom crowd of more than 250 persons at The Ritz-Carlton Westchester in White Plains.

“The watchword there is speed, so it wasn't done perfectly,” Schumer said of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed by Congress in February. Speed in pumping money into the economy was essential to avoid the risk of a deflationary spiral like that which plunged the nation into the Great Depression, he said. The state's senior senator said 80 to 90 percent of the stimulus funds “is going to go where it's supposed to go.”

With the Obama administration's added measures to strengthen banks and prevent more mortgage defaults and house foreclosures, Schumer said he already saw “light at the end of the tunnel.” Yet it will take a longer time for employment and consumer spending to bounce back, he said.

“It's working to the extent that the money has gotten out there,” Rep. Hall said of the stimulus package, though its effect on jobs creation is not yet seen.

“We're seeing the front edge of the wave,” said Hall, the second-term congressman from Dover Plains. “I can say that whatever the bottom is, we've made it shallower. I'm confident of that.”

Hall noted federal agencies offered opportunity for small businesses in the recession. “Every branch of federal government is buying stuff,” he said.

“We are attempting to do what's the right thing” with the stimulus package, said Rep. Engel, the Bronx Democrat. “I think the important thing is that we are moving forward and trying to get this country back on its feet.”

When that is done, the federal government needs “to take very disciplined steps to get back to a balanced budget,” he said. “We have red ink as far as we can see.”

Questioned about federal intervention in Wall Street businesses and the implications for American capitalism, Rep. Lowey, the Democrat from Harrison, said there has to be “a real partnership between government and businesses. I think it’s not just government regulating the industry, I think the industries have to take responsibility for regulating themselves.”

Hall said Congress should have the right to determine executive bonuses at companies receiving federal bailout money. “I think when you come to the taxpayers and ask for money, I think the rules change – and they should change,” he said, drawing loud applause from some in the audience.

Others in the crowd reacted with derisive groans when Hall said President Obama “has taken a very reasonable approach” by turning over to the U.S. attorney general the highly charged issue of whether Bush administration officials should be investigated and prosecuted for waterboarding and other “enhanced” interrogation methods that critics have called torture. With the new White House administration, “We’re seen around the world as recovering the moral high ground,” he said.

“I don’t want to go out on a witch hunt,” he added. “I think we have so much to do in the House and the Senate” that Congress cannot afford a partisan conflict over Bush-era measures against terrorism. “But at the same time we do have principles.” Officials should be held to the rule of law, he said, again drawing loud applause from some in the audience.

Engel was strongly applauded by others in the crowd when he said of putting Bush-era officials on trial: “Frankly, I think it’s a big mistake if Democrats make it a priority and make it appear that we’ve gone on a witch hunt.”