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Guinta listens to small business owners concerns in Rochester

ROCHESTER — U.S. Rep. Frank Guinta, R-N.H., met with small business owners at the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce Tuesday morning to gauge their concerns and receive input on how legislation can help their industries.

The New Hampshire Small Business Development Center hosted the forum in round table fashion. A variety of businesses were represented, including architecture, floral and restaurant services, along with several alternative energy entrepreneurs.

Myriad concerns were raised, ranging from how to obtain research and development tax credits to trade agreements and the rising costs of gas and food prices.

Joel Harris, founder of Dos Amigos Burritos, was one of the first to speak on Tuesday. His fourth store opened in Rochester in August.

"It's hard for us to swallow these food and gas prices, while still offering affordable food to our patrons," Harris told Guinta.

Molly Muelenbroek, of Studley's Flower Garden in Rochester noted 70 percent of cut flowers in the U.S. are imported from Columbia and Ecuador, the duties from which have a trickle-down effect on the floral industry.

"I commend you for doing it and being successful. It's a tough business," Guinta said. Guinta added free trade agreements with Columbia, Panama and South Korea all look as if they will pass.

The architecture and construction industry has been hit hard by the recession. Guinta pointed out a recent \$20,000 contract in Keene had in the area of 35 bids.

"We've been decimated in terms of the impact on our industry," Art Guidano of AG Architects said. "We need support of small businesses and middle class taxpayers. We want programs and responsible solutions."

Guinta said he doesn't support raising taxes on anyone, at present. He pointed out, citing President Barack Obama's figures, even if taxes were raised on those making more than \$250,000 a year, over the next decade, in the best case scenario the country's debt would go down from \$1.6 trillion to \$1.5 trillion.

"A good discussion to have is — do we have a revenue problem or a spending problem, or both?" Guinta said. "It's a complex issue. These things get reduced to sound bytes by

politicians."

Guinta also raised the issue of things being "fair," for individuals, small and large businesses, and all should be treated the same.

Therma Hexx Chief Executive Officer Robert P. Barmore and Michael Behrmann of Revolution Energy were two of the more outspoken when the discussion heated up a bit as it broached the issue of oil and alternative energy subsidies.

Both men represent companies whose interests lie in alternative energy, and brought the conversation back to Guinta's point of "fair."

"You've got to be stable. You've got to have predictability," Barmore said, adding it makes sense to do away with oil subsidies to get away from oil as soon as possible.

Behrmann, whose company is "technology neutral," is of the notion by removing all subsidies, a level playing field will be achieved.

Evan J. Bontemps, president and chief executive officer of Holase, Inc. agreed, saying, "If it's a level playing field, the best technology will win."

After the morning's round table discussion, Guinta headed down to HiRel Systems in Dover. There he shared lunch, stories and a few laughs with a handful of executives. Guinta engaged them, asking what impacts the manufacturing company.

Gary Bates, V.P. of New Products Introduction, pointed to training as an issue. HiRel manufactures goods such as medical and avionic devices, for which specialized training is important.

"We're in a global marketplace and cost is a big factor," he said.

Chief Financial Officer Vinny McMahon backed Bates on the training issue.

"You just have to do it right in the first place. The better trained people help with that," he added.

Guinta raised the idea of partnering with the University of New Hampshire, technical and community colleges, and even high schools as a way to encourage and train younger generations to enter into a manufacturing career. Kathleen Strevel, operations manager, agreed engaging high schools could be beneficial.

"We have a good strategy in building the future pipeline," said Zenagui Brahim, director of operations for the N.H. Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

After the friendly lunch meeting, Guinta went for a quick tour of the HiRel facility before heading off for his next stop at High Liner Foods in Portsmouth.