

Enzi skeptical of stimulus bill

Written by Don Amend

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New approach needed in Afghanistan

Despite the bad economy, U.S. Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., said he believes Wyoming will weather it because of communities like Powell.

"I like coming to Powell," Enzi said. "There's entrepreneurial spirit here that can solve problems."

During a visit to Powell on Thursday, Enzi said that, though the national recession hasn't been as bad in Wyoming, the state is feeling some effects.

However, Enzi doesn't believe the stimulus bill recently passed by Congress will do much to turn the economy around.

"It isn't a stimulus bill," Enzi said. "It's a spending bill."

The bill contains a number of spending proposals that have been pursued for years, Enzi said, and the spending is misdirected in most cases.

"Housing is where the problem is," Enzi said. "Unless we solve that, the economy won't improve."

A provision to address that problem by providing a tax credit for individuals who purchase vacant homes was proposed by a representative who was a former realtor, Enzi said. However, the tax credit, which passed the Senate comfortably but wasn't in the House bill, was removed in conference committee.

Enzi also is skeptical of President Barack Obama's more-recent proposal for dealing with the housing crisis. He has questions about the plan to buy up so-called "toxic loans" from the banks, because the details are not in the bill.

Nor will the stimulus package fulfill its major objective, creating jobs, even though it funds a number of construction projects.

"A lot of the things funded aren't far enough along in planning," Enzi said.

Enzi cited as an example funding for a high-speed railroad between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and added that the funding for the project was raised twice during the work on the bill.

There are some good projects in the package, Enzi said, but they may not get underway soon enough to do any good. Only about 11 percent of the money in the bill will be spent in the next year.

"There are a few good things in the package, but I'm not sure when the money will be spent," he said.

The stimulus package, which was more than 1,000 pages long, was passed in just over a week, and Enzi said more time should have been spent on the legislation.

"We don't do well on eight-day bills," he said. "If you spend more time on a bill, you can find more unintended consequences and loopholes. It's more likely to come out right."

Rather than pass one huge bill, Enzi added, the Obama administration and Congress should have developed a series of more specific bills.

"I'm not in favor of comprehensive bills," Enzi said.

Enzi also is skeptical about speculation that Wyoming will receive \$400 million from the package, because of flexibility built into the bill. Some of the money, for example, is for extended unemployment benefits, but Wyoming wouldn't receive that money unless the state's unemployment rate exceeds 6.8 percent. So far, unemployment in the state hasn't reached that level, and Enzi said it may never rise to that level.

While the economy is the focus of attention, Enzi said the threat of terrorism means the United States can't forget about the Middle East. He cited Obama's recent order to send more troops to Afghanistan as evidence that "the new administration is learning something about terrorism."

"I think we're succeeding in Iraq," Enzi said. "There's not a lot of conversation about Iraq any more, and it's because things are improving."

Afghanistan is very different from Iraq, though, and Enzi said he believes the U.S. needs to change the way it is approaching the war. He had conversations with author Greg Mortenson, whose book, "Three Cups of Tea," describes his work in building schools for girls in Taliban-influenced areas of Pakistan and "knows these people and their culture."

"One of the things he tells me is that when we offer a million-dollar reward for Osama bin Laden, they don't understand what a million (dollars) is," Enzi said. "What they do understand are sheep, because that's where their wealth is."

Enzi said understanding such cultural differences is a key to progress in the area, and the United States needs to work more closely with local people instead of the government to help them resist the Taliban's influence.

"Don't give as much money to the government," Enzi said, "but give it to the local militias."

Ultimately, Enzi said, Afghans must take responsibility for their own security, and the U.S. should work harder toward that goal.

"We haven't put enough pressure on (the Afghans) to do their own thing," Enzi said. "It's time for them to stand on their own feet."

Returning to the economy, Enzi said he is happy to represent Wyoming, and he believes the state can successfully deal with the current recession.

"Wyoming will figure out a way to solve the problem," he said, "and Powell is a place that can do it."