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McCain tours North Country, admits fund-raising woes

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PLYMOUTH – Republican presidential hopeful John McCain trekked to New Hampshire's North Country yesterday, testing his appeal to rural voters and promoting proposals to help the economically depressed areas.

Voters' concerns hinged more on domestic troubles than the war in Iraq -- a welcome distraction for the Arizona senator whose support for the unpopular war is a topic he tries to head off in opening remarks throughout the region.

"They are frustrated and angry and sad," McCain told reporters traveling with him on his bus. "I understand that. I really do."

At his first town hall-style meeting in Plymouth, he repeated his criticism of U.S. House Democrats who on Friday passed a spending bill that would end the war in Iraq by September 2008, if not sooner.

"It's one of the most shameful things I've seen," McCain said, repeating a riff he found on Friday in Franklin. "I'm sorry to tell you, this is one of the most shameful things I've seen in my 24 years in Congress. It's disgraceful."

In Littleton, he faced questions about gun control, abortion rights and immigration -- questions facing all candidates seeking support in the first-in-the-nation primary state.

But visiting areas with some of New England's highest unemployment rates, voters wanted to hear the Arizona senator's solutions to the area's sluggish economy and views on the federal budget.

"This is an area that is really a heartland but needs some assistance and understanding," McCain said in Plymouth.

Voters there again pressed McCain on federal spending.

"Can we reallocate some of that money ... and throw it into health, education, welfare, environment?" asked Alex Ray, who uses his position as head of a restaurant company to promote and contribute to social causes.

McCain's reply: "The first pork barrel bill that comes across my desk as president, I will veto it and make the author of that bill famous."

McCain returns to New Hampshire just a week after a swing through the southern and central parts of the state. During campaign stops then, he tried to repeat his appeal to independent voters that helped him score a 19 percentage point win over then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush in 2000.

But it's hardly the same as eight years ago.

His support for an unpopular war have hampered him nationally, and local conditions in New Hampshire hardly help him.

A 120-acre pulp mill that was Berlin's lifeblood shut down in 2006 and left hundreds out of work.

Since then, the economy suffered and has been an incubator for ideas but little consensus.

"When you have such a small area and you have a large company that's closed, the people have a decision to make," said state labor analyst Dana Cudworth.

In Berlin, where McCain scheduled stops yesterday, the unemployment rate is almost 7 percent.

Elsewhere in the state, it's about 4 percent.

In recent months, the economy took another hit as winter didn't cooperate with the area's tourism expectations.

"There's both an economic transition and a cultural transition. They have to ask the question: What are we going to be known as for the next hundred years?" said Stuart Arnett, the former state director of economic development.

"The North Country isn't just paper mills. It might have been that way a hundred years ago, but not now."

McCain is lowering fund-raising expectations, just days before the first money deadline that may provide a sign about which candidates are viable.

During the bus tour, reporters asked McCain about the ever-important money race, in which donations translate into credibility. The deadline for candidates to report their first-quarter fund-raising is just days away, on Saturday.

"We started late, our money-raising, and we're going to pay a price for it because we got off to a late start," McCain said.

Rivals have been rallying to show they have the millions for a presidential bid. Former Mayor Rudy Giuliani has been holding fund-raisers around the country, and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney raised \$6.5 million in a single day in January.

