

With one year in office behind him, Congressman Allen West (R-District 22) said he is proud of what he's accomplished but remains concerned about issues of government spending and national security.

The Town-Crier sat down with West on the one-year anniversary of his swearing-in to discuss his time in office and his plans for the future.

"It has been an interesting experience," he said. "When you look at Capitol Hill, we have got to get people to have a sense of honor, integrity and character in order to help restore this country. There are too many people who are comfortable with lying. We have to move away from the politics of demagoguery and get back to honest policy."

Despite his concerns, West said that he is proud to serve.

"For a young man who was born 50 years ago in the inner city of Atlanta," he said, "I'm living the American dream. To have served in the United States military and commanded troops in combat, and then to get the opportunity to be a congressional representative — it doesn't get any better than this. Every day I wake up, I realize how blessed I am to be in the position I'm in."

West said that among his proudest accomplishments in office was getting his defense spending bill passed unanimously. The bill cut the Department of Defense printing and reproduction budget by 10 percent.

"I think that when, as a freshman legislator," he said, "you're able to bring a piece of legislation to the House floor and it passes 393-0, that shows it's not just about having the right principles, but also about being pragmatic and passionate about the things you believe in."

As a result, West said he has become a leader within the House and other legislators come to him for guidance.

"That was a launching point," he said. "It got people to say, 'This guy is really on target.' I think people understand that my yes is a yes, and my no is a no."

But his time in office hasn't been without its disappointments. West said his greatest disappointment was that the House was not able to pass a balanced-budget amendment and the reaction of those who seemed proud of that.

"There were [some legislators] on the House floor who clapped and cheered when the vote failed," he said. "That, to me, is a window into what is the problem in our federal government."

West said that he is concerned that government spending is too high, caused by legislators who do not want to rein in their spending.

"People believe they do not need to operate within spending controls," he said. "But yet when you see our American citizens and local governments, they have to."

He noted that despite a 6.5 percent increase in revenue last year, the government deficit remained \$1.3 trillion. "It's not revenue that's the problem," he said. "It's spending."

Another problem, West said, is that 47 percent of wage-earning households don't pay federal income tax due to unnecessary deductions and other loopholes.

"Instead of revenue increase, I think we have to look at how to broaden the tax base," he said. "Tax code reform is so important. Lower the tax rate — flatten it out — and get rid of the loopholes."

Part of the problem, he said, is that 62 percent of the budget is made up of mandatory spending programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, which must be reformed in order to

sustain the future generations.

"Someone has to have the courage and conviction to stand up to the American people and tell them the truth," West said. "We have got to reform these programs to be sure we protect and preserve them for future generations. To do nothing is not a solution. To do nothing means that Medicare is bankrupt in nine years."

West said he considered the 2010 report issued by the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform (also known as the Simpson-Bowles Report) to be a good recommendation but noted that the solution is not easy.

He said he'd like to see legislators work to combat Medicare fraud and repair Social Security, but noted that part of the problem is that the money is often taken out for spending in other areas.

"It should stay an independent trust fund account," he said. "It should not be used as a general operating account."

West said that he believes the government should promote individual responsibility and accountability.

"We're not doing that in America," he said. "We're promoting victims. Forty-eight-point-five percent of Americans are on some form of government aid. There was a 31 percent increase in food stamps. That's not how you turn this economy around."

West said that he believes in the free market and capitalism but thinks that the government believes in "crony capitalism."

"The government believes that you can take taxpayer dollars and you can choose," he said. "That's not a free market."

The issue, he said, is not a party issue but one of politics.

Another major concern, West said, is that national defense has been overlooked.

"I'm really concerned that no one is paying attention to national security and foreign policy in the United States of America right now," he said. "You can get smart guys in a room and they can help you fix the economy, but when you have [Iranian President] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad going on a Latin American tour next week, that's a problem."

On the heels of presidential hopeful Rick Santorum's declaration that he'd attack Iran if that nation does not cease its nuclear arms program, West said that a military option must remain on the table.

"I understand that the mentality over there is one that respects strength and might," West said. "Rhetoric does not get you anything. They are not concerned about the welfare of their citizens; they are concerned about a theocratic agenda. They have declared that they want to use some type of device against Israel, and I don't think that we should allow them to hold the rest of the world hostage."

West noted that in 2003, Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi gave up his nuclear arms programs after the capture of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. "I think that there is a leverage point," he said. "We have to be very precarious in our dealings with Pakistan because they have a nuclear device."

West said that the theory of mutually assured destruction — which kept things peaceful between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union — is not in play with Iran.

"We have to be resilient, show resolve and show strength," he said. "It is about peace through strength."

As he begins his bid for re-election, West said that he is concerned about redistricting, which could dramatically redraw his district, but would wait to see a final map before worrying.

He said he hopes to bring jobs to Florida to combat the 10.5 percent unemployment rate in Palm Beach County as of December.

"It hurts me to see closed storefronts and foreclosure signs," he said. "This is a national issue, but it's really felt here locally."

West also said he would push for energy independence and the development of other natural energy resources.

"I think that energy independence is part of turning this thing around," he said. "I have always said we need full spectrum development of the resources we have."

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