

[Watt gets hands dirty on district visit](#) (Salisbury Post – August 10, 2011)

By Karissa Minn

U.S. Rep. **Mel Watt** got his hands dirty in Salisbury on Tuesday during his “Trading Places” tour of the 12th Congressional District. Tuesday morning, **Watt** made a few bricks by hand at Old Carolina Brick Co. off U.S. 70. Before trying the process himself, he took a look around the facility and talked to some people who work there. “This is high quality stuff, done the way that it’s not done anywhere else now — handmade,”

**Watt**

said. Art Burkhardt, vice president of sales and marketing at Old Carolina Brick Co., compared the bricks to snowflakes because each one is unique.

**Watt**

learned from plant manager Brian Cleveland how to roll clay in sand and knead it before throwing mud into a mold in the facility’s special shapes section. He then scraped off the top and flipped the wet brick onto a table. This is the 15th straight year that

**Watt**

, a Democrat, has worked alongside people in communities throughout his district. So far,

**Watt**

said, this year’s tour is characterized by worry and uncertainty. “The thing that’s troubling, just about everywhere I’m going now, is that business has slowed down, confidence in the economy is down and the impact is being felt in places like this,” he said. Burkhardt told **Watt**

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that people who buy specialty products like handmade bricks are typically more well-off, but even they are losing money in the stock market now. He said the business may temporarily shut down its manufacturing process in a few weeks. “For the past year and a half, we’ll work for about four months and then close for a couple months,” Burkhardt said. “We’ll build up inventory, but it’s slow-moving, so we’ll close down and catch up with what’s on the yard.” During that time, those who aren’t selling or transporting brick must either find other work or collect unemployment. “If we had done this three or four weeks down the road, this place may not even be open,”

**Watt**

said. “One guy that came up to speak to me has been here for 22 years.” The business currently employs about 50 people, including office staff, which is about 10 fewer employees than in normal years. Burkhardt called

**Watt’s**

visit “timely” because of the economic downturn. “It gave us hope and optimism that things will get better,” Burkhardt said. “When someone from Congress comes to see you, you’re left with a bit of an

upbeat feeling. ... It makes you feel like you are a part of something, that you aren't disconnected." **Watt** said lawmakers need to get serious about finding a bipartisan solution to the country's debt problem and its general economic woes. "We've got to do something to move toward a balanced budget on the cutting side and on the revenue side,"

### **Watt**

said. "There's no way I would try to balance my own budget without ...looking both at expenses and income." His three-day "Trading Places" tour began Monday in Winston-Salem and Greensboro and will end today in Charlotte. Later Tuesday, **Watt** was scheduled to work as a volunteer at Family Service of the Piedmont in High Point, a customer service representative at Team Telecom LLC in Lexington and an engineer at Sparky's Market Place in Lexington. According to a press release from his office, it is a means for him to stay in contact with constituents and hear their concerns and opinions about the impact that recent legislation has had on their lives.