

[Watt says politics, finances hinder legislation for veterans](#) (Salisbury Post – November 8, 2011)

By Karissa Minn

U.S. Rep. **Mel Watt** said Monday he's fighting in Congress for veterans, but political and financial forces are resisting. **Watt** listened to local veterans' concerns at a town hall meeting Monday at the VFW N.C. Post 3006 in Salisbury. He talked to them about legislation helping veterans that passed the U.S. House this year, including two bills signed into law. **Watt** said the current economy and partisan political climate are making it hard to pass those kinds of bills, which he continues to support anyway. "Some people think we shouldn't have the federal government doing anything for anybody, and these are federal programs,"

Watt

said. "It's tough, but that's not a justification for not putting up a fight." One bill that became law this year increases the compensation rates for veterans' disability and other benefits by the same percentage as the cost of living increase in Social Security rates. Another pays tuition and fees for eligible veterans to attend non-public institutions of higher education. This additional benefit only applies to veterans serving after Sept. 11, 2011. Salisbury resident Phil Birchall said he thinks people who served in any era should get those benefits. "I don't think the VA should be put in a position to distinguish the service time of veterans needing their assistance," Birchall said. **Watt** said he agrees, and he voted for the current bill to get the benefit in the system. Now, he said, it needs to be extended to all veterans. Several people asked about benefits for themselves or veterans they know, and **Watt** referred questions about individual cases to his staff. He said he'd look into them and try to find answers. Some expressed frustration with the slow process of getting benefits approved, especially for disability. **Watt** said legislators are trying to work on the backlog. Under a bill that has passed the U.S. House but not the Senate,

Watt

said, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs would assess annually the skills of employees and managers who process VA compensation and pension benefit claims. Those who are found "deficient" would be offered training and remediation. Disciplinary action would be taken if they don't earn a satisfactory rating after two chances. One man asked if there is legislation to allow reserve military members to get the same retirement benefits as those on active duty. "A bill has been introduced to make those benefits equal," **Watt** said. "I am in support of that bill. That is an aberration in the law that has not been closed." Later, the same man asked about national health care reform and how it would affect veterans. "One pledge that we got was that it's not going to have any impact on veterans' hospitals or the

delivery of veterans' services,"

Watt

said. He said there will be consequences to bringing 96 percent of the American people under some form of health insurance. But he believes they will be more positive than negative. Allowing those who are now uninsured to get covered preventative care instead of going to emergency rooms,

Watt said, will make their treatment less costly for taxpayers. Some town hall participants criticized the government and **Watt** himself for funding certain programs at the expense of veterans. One suggested cutting foreign aid, either partially or completely. Another said the U.S. should drill for domestic oil to lower gas prices and citizens' expenses.

Watt

said he doesn't think either of those would be permanent solutions. Oil speculators will still drive up prices, he said, and foreign aid buys a lot of influence around the world. Ciat K. Shabazz, founder of Harry Veterans Community Outreach Services in Winston-Salem, thanked Watt for his support of veterans. She said she's concerned about those needing housing assistance who don't qualify for it because they make a small amount of money. "We should never have a homeless veteran," Shabazz said. "We need to do whatever possible to get our veterans a place to live."

Watt

said he agrees the program should be revisited, has fought for veterans' housing legislation and will continue to fight for it. Two veterans raised concerns about new limitations on use of the Salisbury VA hospital's wellness center at the Salisbury VA hospital, which

Watt

said he could not address at the meeting but would look into later. "I want you to know that I share the frustration that you have expressed here today,"

Watt

said at the end of the meeting. "Realistically, honestly, I don't have the power to wave a magic wand and just make them go away. But it's not because we're not fighting to try to make your lives better. There's not a constituency more deserving of that."