

## TCPalm: Mahoney's politics have personal touch

By Amie Parnes

May 13, 2007

WASHINGTON - Joe Ryker was unhappy with Rep. Tim Mahoney's vote three weeks ago to withdraw troops from Iraq, and he immediately called the congressman's Capitol Hill office to voice his displeasure.

The legislative aide who took the call said she would relay the message.

She did.

Five days later, it was Mahoney who returned the call.

With no one home, the Democrat who represents part of the Treasure Coast found himself defending his Iraq vote on Ryker's answering machine.

"Yeah, Connie and Joe, Congressman Mahoney callin' you," the freshman lawmaker began, spinning a business card on his wooden desk as he spoke. "Just checking in with you. ... I understand you're disappointed with me because of my vote on Iraq. ... You just need to know that I wouldn't do anything that would hurt (U.S. soldiers). And nor would we in Congress. Come by the office. Look forward to meeting you sometime."

Since taking office in January, Mahoney has made it a point to keep in touch with the people that elected him - and even those who didn't.

While most lawmakers rely on their aides to return calls and answer letters, at least once a week, Mahoney pulls up the office case files on his laptop, pokes through the call logs and reads through the praises, complaints and frustrations of his constituents back home.

Then - sometimes he says without even alerting his aides - he'll personally call the constituents to discuss their issues,

defend his vote or offer help. At times, he has given out his cell phone number to those who are in dire need of help, urging the constituents to "holler if you need anything."

Mahoney said he's brought his business background to Washington and said personal communication is key to building relationships with his constituents. He said he opened an office in the heart of downtown Stuart for the same reason, so constituents will see him in the storefront window and stop by for a chat.

Mahoney's aides in Washington and Florida usually receive 800 to 900 phone calls, e-mails and letters a week on a variety of issues: everything from Iraq to immigration to personal problems with government agencies. Mahoney and members of his staff respond to every correspondence usually within two weeks, they say.

The congressman said he has called constituents when he was lounging at home or in a hotel room, or even sometimes when he's watching his daughter, Bailey, compete in Equestrian competitions.

"Whenever I have down time, I'll look up the cases and pick up the phone out of the blue and call someone," Mahoney said.

Last week, between a committee meeting and a series of votes, he dialed up four constituents to help them resolve issues.

One woman from Stuart needed help with a passport issue. A man needed help with the local Veterans Affairs office. Another wanted to talk about his vote on Iraq.

Milton Wegler, of Jenson Beach, stopped by Mahoney's office several weeks back looking for help with his homeowners insurance.

Nationwide Insurance dropped his policy in February and ever since he's been looking for another provider but has had little success.

Mahoney couldn't solve his immediate problem. He merely listened.

But for the time being at least, Wegler seemed satisfied and that was the point.

"It's important that we help, but it's more important that we listen," Mahoney said. "People want to know that they're not helpless."