

## Sarasota Herald Tribune: Congressman finds walking door-to-door is not just for campaigning

By Jeremy Wallace

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There's nothing unusual about a politician going door-to-door to drum up a few votes right before an election.

But when U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney decided to hit the streets of Port Charlotte this weekend, it was notable for its timing. Mahoney is almost a year away from his re-election and was only going to hit a dozen or so houses - hardly enough to swing an election one way or the other.

"It's just good to see how people are really living," Mahoney told me this morning as he recounted his two hours walking through the neighborhoods near the Peace River Regional Medical Center. "It unbelievably opens your eyes."

Mahoney said standing in a widow's doorway as she explains how she is trying to raise 5 children on a salary of less than \$20,000 is more persuasive than anything a high-paid D.C. lobbyist can say.

He said he is convinced most members of Congress have no idea about the real tension around health care costs and the general struggle people go through to make ends meet. But spending an couple walking through working class neighborhoods in Charlotte County, Mahoney said it felt like he got a powerful reminder of how much work Congress needs to get done. He said health care costs were seemingly part of every conversation he had on Saturday.

Mahoney, who has been in Congress for less than a year, said its easy for members of Congress to get trapped in a cycle of going to Washington, then to posh fundraisers in the district, then back to Washington. "It's easy to live an insulated life," he said.

Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, said the best thing that could happen to Congress is if every district was redrawn where they are as competitive as his is. Maybe then, he said, it would force all members of Congress to stay as in better touch with the communities they represent.

"Part of the problem is they have become so disassociated with the people who elected them," Mahoney said.

He said if they spent a few hours out in a working class neighborhood it would humble them and "change their heart."

Mahoney is in what most political watchers say is one of the most difficult re-election campaigns in the nation. Mahoney is a Democrat in a district that historically picked Republicans.

Mahoney insisted the neighborhood walking is not about campaigning. He said he is not even sure if the dozen people he spoke to can even vote. And even if they could, he said it's hardly going to be enough votes to make a big difference between winning and losing.

Mahoney represents the 16th District, which includes all or part of eight counties, including most of Charlotte. Mahoney beat Republican Joe Negron last year for the seat. Negron was a last minute fill-in after former Rep. Mark Foley resigned unexpectedly.

Three Republicans have filed to run against Mahoney. If all three remain in the race, they would face off in a primary battle next summer, with the winner taking on Mahoney in November 2008.