

By the time this column hits the local papers, my staff and I will be well into our 19 town hall meeting schedule that will include stops in all six First District counties this week.

Our current schedule for town meetings was put together back in June, long before the national news reports of record crowds showing up at similar meetings being held by congressmen and senators in other states.

As you know, some of those meetings have turned ugly and controversial; in fact, a few of my colleagues – all Democrats – have even cancelled their meetings because they apparently didn't like what they were hearing from their constituents.

While I, too, expect to have good crowds – based on the record number of calls coming into the office before these meetings – I am actually looking forward to doing what I often do when Congress has a break... coming home and listening to the people for whom I work.

By the end of this month, we will have held over 204 such meetings since you first sent me to Congress.

And with so many important – I would say critical – issues being debated in Washington... from the reckless spending binge Congress and the Obama Administration has been on, to the hot debate of socialized health care or the jobs-killing “Cap and Trade” bill, there will clearly be no shortage of topics for us to discuss.

Trip proved valuable:

Another reason I am happy to be back home this week is because I have just concluded a 13-day trip with House Republican Leader John Boehner – and four of my colleagues – where we traveled to seven countries that, like America, have been severely affected by the global economic recession.

The purpose of the trip was to afford us an opportunity to get our arms around how leaders in Germany, Switzerland, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China and Canada – both government officials and the private sector alike – are responding to their own crises.

Moreover, it was extremely helpful to have candid, face-to-face discussions about how the current public policy debates in Washington are impacting decision-making and economic

recovery plans in other countries.

While the press likes to make these trips sound like a vacation, trust me, the last thing I packed was a bathing suit or a set of golf clubs. Instead, here's an idea of the kind of meetings we scheduled:

In Germany, our delegation met with government and private sector officials in both Frankfurt and Bavaria to discuss the German response to the economic crisis. Of particular note was a working lunch meeting with some of the leading economists with the European Central Bank (their version of the Federal Reserve). In particular, we discussed the impact the financial crisis is having on Germany's export-driven economy, as well as concerns about the real amount of sovereign and commercial debt German banks hold.

We also met with a senior official from BMW who discussed the challenges facing the automobile industry worldwide, as well as his company's efforts at next-generation energy-efficient automobiles.

In Bern, Switzerland, we met with Dr. Thomas Zeltner, director of the Federal Office of Public Health. Given so much discussion in the U.S. about the possibility of changing our health care system, it was fascinating to hear Dr. Zeltner (who received an MPA from Harvard) talk about the pros and cons of nationalized health care. There are clearly more reasons to be concerned

than what some in Washington might think.

Much of the other discussions in Switzerland focused on the impact of the financial crisis and the likelihood that here in the U.S. we are looking at a jobless recovery for the foreseeable future.

In Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia – three countries that were never on my “bucket list” of places to visit before I die – we had extremely candid conversations with the highest government officials about how U.S. interests there are of paramount importance to us here.

For instance, meeting with Ukraine President Victor Yushchenko, we discussed its proximity to Russia and its strategic position in serving as the transit point for energy resources to Western Europe.

Our delegation also met with the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan as well as the President and Prime Minister of Mongolia. Whether from a national security and energy perspective in Kazakhstan, or geostrategic mineral and other natural resource issues in Mongolia, we took the opportunity to encourage both countries to continue to seek closer ties with the U.S. and our European allies.

In China, our delegation met with private sector officials to assess the impact of the financial crisis, with a particular emphasis as to how China's government response is expected to impact its growth in 2009.

Many of the world's leading economists predict China will be the first country to experience steep inflation, with the U.S. not far behind. Since so much of our own debt is being financed by the Chinese, these conversations were particularly critical.

Of personal note, in one meeting in Shanghai, I had the good fortune of sitting next to a man originally from Dauphin Island. He was most interested in talking about beach renourishment on the west end of the island!

Finally, in Canada, we had some very meaningful conversations with private sector officials to discuss the economic and political impact of the "Buy American" provisions in the U.S. economic stimulus package, as well as energy cooperation issues. As you may know, Canada provides the largest source of oil and gas to the U.S.

All in all, the trip was extremely valuable, as was another trip I took with Leader Boehner in February to Afghanistan and Iraq.

The bottom line is this: No matter where we went, there were constant reminders that the economic challenges we are facing here in the U.S. are truly global in nature.

Secondly, Americans aren't the only ones who are concerned by how much money we are borrowing and spending. Many of our most candid conversations with foreign heads of state started out with "we are having a hard time understanding your fiscal strategy in the United States."

Finally, even though we have many serious challenges facing us here at home, we need to always remember that our worst day as Americans is better than the rest of the world's best days!

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.