

One call links 1,400 people for 'tele-town' talk

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WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander talked to 1,400 of his constituents on a recent night without leaving his Capitol Hill office.

The Quitman Republican was participating in the latest rage in Congress and among the Louisiana congressional delegation: "tele-town talks."

Using one of several national communications firms, Alexander automatically calls constituents, then hosts an hour-long program that can best be described as a 21st century fireside chat.

"Hello, this is Rodney Alexander," the six-year congressman began. "We're live here in Washington."

The exchange gives Alexander an instant read on constituent concerns. He is even able to conduct polls on questions such as whether GI education benefits should be extended.

"Most people sit around their dinner table talking about health care and gas prices," said Adam Terry, Alexander's chief of staff. "This is like an extension of the dinner table."

Alexander called 5,000 of his constituents at 7 p.m. Central time. About 30 percent agreed to join the dialogue by pressing the required numbers on their phone.

"Hello Frances from Winnsboro," Alexander said.

Frances was concerned about an impending merger between Northwest and Delta airlines, fearing her husband's pension benefits may be lost.

Alexander assured her that the merger requires approval by Congress

and that the chairman of the committee already has some reservations.

Debbie McCall is president of Cardinal Communication Strategies, which Alexander hired to conduct the call. Over the last year, elected officials and some political candidates have been turning to the technology to reach out to people in their districts, McCall said.

She estimates her company conducts up to 15 such calls a month across the country.

"It's a way to let people into the Democratic process, especially if they feel disenfranchised," McCall said. "And you can do so in the privacy of their home. Even if they're only listening for 10 minutes, they're connected."

If a constituent isn't home, Alexander leaves a recorded message. And people listening can leave Alexander a voice-mail when the hour-long session is finished. Other Louisiana congressional members recently using a similar service were Sen. David Vitter, R-La., Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, and Rep. Charles "Charlie" Melancon, D-Napoleonville.

Boustany has held at least eight town talks by telephone and hopes to work up to having one a month. He said he appreciates the instant feedback.

"They're usually about relevant issues that affect the district and what we're doing here in Washington," Boustany said. "I go home and people say it's great."

Terry's wife, Jenni, serves as Alexander's press secretary and randomly selects calls to put through to her boss. Adam Terry then looks on his computer screen in an adjacent room and copies

the caller's name and town on an index card, slipping it to his boss.

Having held a similar event in October, Alexander appeared comfortable as a host, his folksy ways an asset. When the first few callers were initially unable to get through, Alexander didn't skip a beat, using the dead time to give an update on the current Farm Bill.

Alexander still likes to hold town hall meetings when in his district, noting the best contact with constituents occurs when he can shake their hands, look into their eyes and listen to their concerns in person.

But as the old telephone commercial says, calling is the next best thing to being there.

"It's just the fact that you can touch so many people that quickly," Alexander said.

On the most-recent calls, Alexander constituents chiefly complained about high gasoline prices. Alexander conducted a poll, allowing supporters to press one and opponents to press two, asking whether there should be more domestic drilling. Nine out of 10 of the estimated 400 respondents voted in support of increased domestic drilling.

With 95 percent support, constituents called for increases to the GI bill education payments. Eighty percent voted that President Bush's No Child Left Behind program has been unsuccessful.

Dallas Crain, of Mangham, told Alexander he appreciated the opportunity to talk to his congressman by phone.

"This is such a wonderful idea," Crain said. "And I'm glad it's not on a church night."