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Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) makes a point during the town meeting held Wednesday night at the Gibson Center for Senior Services in North Conway. (JAMIE GEMMITI PHOTO)

Graham speaks to voters at Gibson town-hall meet

By DAYMOND STEER
THE CONWAY DAILY SUN

CONWAY — South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham answered a wide range of questions on topics like gun control and climate change Wednesday night at a town hall-style meeting at the Gibson Center in front of a crowd of about 40 people.

Graham, 60, of South Carolina is one of 16 presidential candidates seeking to become the Republican nominee next year.

The three-term senator said he plans to hold more than 100 town-hall meetings in the state.

He was introduced by State Rep. Karen Umberger (R-Conway). "I know he's open to any questions that you might have," said Umberger.

After giving a speech mostly about his background and how he would put more troops on the ground to fight ISIL and attempt to reduce the national debt, Graham took questions from the audience.

The first to ask the senator a question was Andy Davis of Albany, who wanted to get Graham's position on climate change.

"I believe that climate change is real," said Graham. "The question is, do CO2 emissions that come from smokestacks and millions of cars and trucks throughout the planet burning gas and fossil fuels in general, do they create greenhouse gas effects that trap heat? I think they do. Unlike my friends on the stage last night (Democratic presidential candidates), I don't believe it's the biggest threat to mankind."

For Graham, that distinction belongs to the possibility of Iranians

getting nuclear weapons. That being said, Graham said he would try to address climate change in a "business-friendly manner," which would involve lowering carbon emissions and using wind, solar, nuclear power, domestic oil and oil from Canada. He would also export domestic natural gas to undercut Russia's economy.

Of Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, Graham said: "He's a gas station masquerading as a country."

Graham would also make sure people get tax credits for weatherizing their homes and would also ensure that light bulbs and appliances sold in the U.S. are energy-efficient.

"What would the world be like if we had to rely less on fossil fuels coming from people who hate our guts?" Graham asked rhetorically.

Asked about voters' apparent disdain for longtime politicians in this election cycle, Graham made the case that he was not the cause of dysfunction in Washington. He said issues like fixing the "broken" immigration system call for bipartisanship. In his seven-person primary in 2014, his opponents called him names like "Lindsey Gomez" for trying to reach across the aisle on immigration.

"I don't believe in deporting 11 million illegal immigrants," Graham said, adding he was in favor of deporting felons. "As to the rest, you can stay here, but you have to learn our language, I don't speak it well, but look how far I've come; you have to pay a fine to help us secure our borders; you have to pay taxes, you have to meet the IRS like the rest of us, and you

GRAHAM from page 12

have to get in the back of the line, you can't cut in front of people who have been waiting patiently," Graham said he would tell the immigrants.

Speaking about bipartisanship, Graham said it was unrealistic for other Republicans to think they could get the Affordable Care Act repealed while Barack Obama is president.

"If you want to hear those things, I'm your worst choice," said Graham. "If you want someone who is commander in chief ready on day one, pick me. The last thing you want to do given the world as it is, is pick somebody who doesn't know anything about the damn world. I've been to Iraq and Afghanistan 35 times. Nobody running is more prepared to be commander in chief than I am."

Graham is a South Carolina native. His parents, who died when he was 22, owned a liquor store, restaurant and pool hall. After attending law school, Graham went into the Air Force and worked as a military lawyer in Europe. He recently retired from the Air Force Reserves after 33 years in the military.

Conway resident Steven Steiner asked about the heroin epidemic and told Graham that he once saved a man from overdosing by administering CPR. As for gun control, Steiner said that some states would allow him to carry a gun concealed, but doing so in Massachusetts would be a felony.

Graham responded, "Why would you want to go to Massachusetts?" That got a laugh.

In all seriousness, Graham said that the Second Amendment is there to protect the First Amendment, which provides for freedom of speech and the press. Graham said he's working with Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) on a bill that would take \$400 million to allow states to enroll people in the federal background check system who have been adjudicated a danger to themselves or others at the state level.

"I think everyone in this room would say if you go through a court process, and the judge has found you mentally incompetent, you need to be in the background check system," said Graham.

"The idea of carrying a gun responsibly anywhere in the U.S., if you meet the criteria in your own state, I'm OK

with," he said.

Graham said it would be difficult to get a bill through that would allow concealed carry permit holders the right to carry in all 50 states. In response to a question about school shootings, Graham said he didn't like the idea of gun-free schools but said districts should have the right to have them if they want. Instead, he would like to see school staff get gun training so they could fight back in the event of a shooting.

As for the drug problem, Graham said he didn't know heroin was a problem in New Hampshire until Ayotte told him. He said she has a bill to deal with treatment and prevention. He also recommended that dealers be sent to prison.

"You need to drive them out of this state," said Graham.

Conway resident Joe Bagshaw asked Graham about his statements about the need for a constitutional amendment to address campaign finance reform. Bagshaw pressed Graham about why he hasn't co-sponsored a bill or written one of his own to address the topic.

Graham said in his opinion it would probably take a constitutional amendment to clean the system up after the Citizens United Supreme Court case. Graham said he's working on a bill with Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), but they have a disagreement about unions. Graham called himself "the most dangerous guy in politics" because he's unafraid of losing and can speak his mind. He said the New Hampshire primary is the antidote to big money because it can launch candidates with modest funding, like himself.

"The truth is I don't think we will have any effort to change our campaign finance laws until we have a scandal and that's coming," said Graham. "Unlimited money from unknown people is going to be a problem for everybody in this room."

After the town hall meeting, Graham did a seven-minute television interview with Greta Van Susteren on Fox News. Graham did the interview at the Gibson Center and was interviewed remotely. He encouraged attendees at the Gibson Center to stick around after the interview so he could meet them personally.

daymond@conwaydailysun.com



Surrounded by local residents, Lindsey Graham gets ready for an interview on Fox News at the Gibson Center for Senior Services in North Conway on Wednesday night. (JAMIE GEMMITI PHOTO)

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