

County residents speak out on president's work

Five Burlington County residents were asked to assess the first year of President Barack Obama, who addressed Congress and the nation Wednesday night with what many believed was a critical State of the Union speech.

The president's busy agenda includes the flagging economy, health care reform and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - all issues that concern most Americans, including those in the county:

Willingboro residents Jill Banks and her mother, Hope, think President Obama is doing his best with a bad situation. They feel more time is needed to turn things around.

Jill Banks, 44, a John F. Kennedy High School and Rutgers University graduate, opened her own home design business, Happily Better After, last year. Being a business owner has brought with it unique challenges. The economy, stalled real estate market and health care issues hit close to home for Banks, a single homeowner.

"People are looking for rock-bottom deals; they don't care what it looks like," she said of the real estate market the impact of so many foreclosures. "They just care if it is half the price of what it was a few years ago." That factor has greatly affected the home staging part of her business, she said.

A former marketing employee at Ballard Spahr law firm in Philadelphia, Banks said she knows a few people who have been unemployed for more than a year after being laid off.

"It's been a difficult year for a lot of people," she said. "There are so many people in the job market."

Last year marked the first time Banks had to pay for health insurance on her own. She said the \$365 a month premium is steep.

"It costs more than my car payment every month, and I don't get to drive my health insurance around," Banks said. She said she has had "to watch my pennies a little bit more" and cut back on social activities and spending.

Banks said she wants Obama to put more energy into turning around the economy and believes the health care debate took some focus away from doing so.



Willingboro resident Jill Banks wants President Barack Obama to put more energy into turning around the economy.

Nancy Rokos/Staff Photographer

"Until people are secure in their jobs, I don't think (health care reform) is going to happen," she said.

Banks gave the president a B grade for his first year. Her mother, a retired senior citizen who has lived in the township for nearly 40 years, gave him an A.

But both think he needs to change his approach to governing.

"I think he is doing a good job, but he has to come off of that Joe Cool role and get a little angry," Hope Banks said. "He needs to make waves and get a little more assertive."

Jill Banks said Obama needs to do a little "regrouping" and that the losses in the governors' races in New Jersey and Virginia and in the U.S. Senate in Massachusetts have hit home.

"I think he is scrambling and trying to change some things," she said. "Although a lot of people have been very critical of his first year, I take the view of, look what he had to deal with. With all the things he had to deal with, I think he did OK."

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