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## For leverage, Idaho Democrats threaten voting with GOP right

Aiming to leverage their limited numbers to win hearings on Democratic priorities, House Minority Leader John Rusche suggested Tuesday that his most-liberal members could vote with the most-conservative Republicans against creating a state-run health insurance exchange.

Gov. Butch Otter wants to use \$20.3 million in federal funding to establish an Idaho exchange, the online marketplace foreseen by the 2010 federal health care overhaul to help uninsured individuals and small businesses compare and buy coverage. But to do it, Otter needs at least 36 votes in the 70-member House.

With many of the 57 GOP members, especially arch conservatives, likely to reject using federal money on philosophical grounds, Rusche, D-Lewiston, said his 13-member caucus could play a crucial role. Political considerations aside, some Democrats say they may not vote for a bill anyway, if Otter doesn't allay their concerns it will favor insurance companies, not consumers.

"Especially in the House, that 36th vote could be hard to come by," Rusche told reporters in the Idaho Capitol. "My belief is, we have the numbers to affect passage of that bill. Unless something has changed, there is no way they can pass it without our support."

Among priorities that could become currency in political talks: Otter's proposal for \$45 million in tax relief, which Democrats believe is ill-defined and will benefit special interests, and the likelihood of cancelling the Republican governor's proposed 3 percent wage bonus for state workers and teachers totaling \$41 million, which could happen if the economy sours.

Rusche, a medical doctor and former insurance industry executive, favors using the federal grant to develop Idaho's exchange. It will afford the state more control in important policy considerations, like establishing minimum benefit requirements acceptable to Idaho insurers, he said.

But if the Legislature balks, Rusche said, the federal government will step in and set one up itself. Other Democrats agree.

"We get an exchange, anyway you look at it," said Sen. Elliot Werk, D-Boise.

Otter spokesman Jon Hanian declined to comment on Democrats' strategy, but said the administration would be reaching out to every lawmaker.

Otter acknowledges the exchange is a tough sell, especially since Idaho is among at least 26 states suing to throw out the health care reforms' requirement that everyone buy insurance.

"We're explaining what the possibilities are, what might happen if we fail to act," Hanian said. "If the state does not adopt a federally certified state-run exchange, the feds are going to impose a federal exchange" that the governor has concluded will be worse for Idaho businesses and consumers, he said.

In the past, Democrats have been reluctant to align themselves with conservatives for political gain.

In 2011, for instance, all 13 House Democrats voted with the 40-29 majority to extend a sales tax rebate for alternative energy development, a bill important to Republican leaders like Assistant Majority Leader Scott Bedke. Conservatives panned the bill as unnecessary corporate welfare for the wind-energy industry that was driving up power costs.

At the time, the minority was fighting for a hearing on raising Idaho's cigarette tax to fund Medicaid, so they could have threatened Bedke that they would vote with conservatives if he didn't allow their cigarette measure a thorough vetting in committee.

Instead, Democrats spent several days employing delay tactics - forcing bills to be read in their entirety - in a failed bid to get their way.

This year, with Otter's state-run exchange on the line, Rusche suggested his party may take a different tack, even if this brand of raw politics doesn't feel quite right to some members.

Rep. Sue Chew, D-Boise, said she typically doesn't think good public policy is made by playing hardball. But she said even a "straight-on kid," as Chew dubbed her own style, could appreciate how the threat of voting with conservative Republican exchange foes like Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, might bolster Democrats limited clout.

Would she do it?

"You might see that someday," said Chew.