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Opposing health care plan

Simpson, Minnick say proposal just won't do the job

BOISE (AP) — Idaho's two U.S. House members are joining the opposition forming against legislation designed to reform the nation's health care system. Rep. Mike Simpson, a Republican, is vowing to vote against supported by Obama and many congressional Democrats. While Simpson agrees changes to the health care system are needed, he says the bill awaiting debate would raise taxes, cost too much and not do enough to fix the problems. Democrat Rep. Walt Minnick says the bill is flawed, fails to guarantee affordable health insurance for all Americans and calls for too big of a role for government.

Still, Minnick says he is hopeful that he can support a final version of the bill that is more fiscally sound and has broader, bipartisan support.

Idaho Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo both indicate they'll wait to see the House version of the proposal before deciding if it's something they will support or oppose in the Senate. Meanwhile, Senate Democrats essentially told President Barack Obama to slow down the health care push on Thursday, dashing hopes of rushing his sweeping overhaul to a summertime vote and adding to the troubles the plan could face as the year wears on.

"That's OK," the president replied gamely. "Just keep working."

No one is suggesting that delay equals defeat. In fact, the Senate's top Democrat promised a bipartisan bill in the next two weeks. But Obama has been pushing hard for quick passage of legislation he can sign to expand coverage to all Americans and control ruinous medical costs. And he's counting on fast action while his first-year popularity holds.

Republican foes have been settling into a delaying game in hopes of weakening if not killing the historic changes in the way America provides and pays for health care. But they're not the source of the immediate problem. Divisions within the ranks of Obama's fellow Democrats have stalled the legislation.

While confirming there will be no Senate vote before Congress goes home in early August, the chamber's Democratic leaders spoke optimistically of wrapping up a bipartisan bill in the next two weeks.

That offered no reassurance to Democrats in the House, many of whom are reluctant to vote on a \$540-billion tax increase to help pay for the overhaul unless senators also stick their necks out before an election year. Exiting a contentious leadership meeting, Rep. Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, the third-ranking House Democrat, called for canceling the August recess if a bill isn't passed.

On a trip to Ohio, Obama shrugged off the delay. "I want to get it right. but I also want to get it done promptly," Obama said.

The president compared the health overhaul to NASA's Apollo program that landed astronauts on the moon 40 years ago this week. "We can do this," he insisted.

But many are questioning the engineering of House and Senate committee bills that emerged in recent weeks. Doubts revolve around costs to taxpayers and the reach of government. In the House, moderate and conservative Democrats bucked against legislation written with a liberal tilt by party elders. In the Senate, moderate Democrats are insisting on trying to work out a deal with a handful of Republicans who are willing to talk. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., suggested that slowing things down may be the wise course for now.

"It's better to have a product based on quality and thoughtfulness rather than try to jam something through," Reid said, delivering the official announcement of the delay. His words were a near-echo of moderate Republicans who support sweeping changes but criticize Obama's rush to act.

Reid said the Senate Finance Committee will act on its portion of the bill before lawmakers' month-long break after the first week of August. He then will oversee how that bill is merged with separate legislation passed by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee earlier this month.

The process will be difficult since Finance, led by Democratic Sen. Max Baucus of Montana, is seeking a bipartisan deal while the health committee bill was pushed through by Democrats on a party-line vote.

For example, while the health committee bill calls for a government insurance plan to compete with private carriers, the Finance negotiators are looking at nonprofit insurance co-ops that wouldn't be run by the government. Finance is also considering a tax on insurers who sell high-cost plans valued at \$25,000 or more, while Obama and House Democrats prefer raising taxes on upper-income Americans.

Reid said the decision to delay was made Wednesday night in the hopes of getting a final bill that can win at least 60 votes in the Senate. He said he listened to requests from senior Republicans working with Baucus to allow more time for a compromise to emerge.

Liberals seethed with frustration over the delays — and the compromises moderates are making. "The Finance Committee keeps dragging their feet and dragging their feet and dragging their feet. It's time for them to fish or cut bait," Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said in a conference call with Iowa reporters. "The people of America voted for Barack Obama last year to lead this country and make changes."

It's not that simple, Finance members say. "We have the tough job," said Sen. Thomas Carper, D-Del., who's on the committee. "We have to figure out how to pay for this stuff." Nine freshman Senate Democrats, largely from swing states, sent a letter to Baucus urging him to keep working toward a bipartisan solution.

In the House, Democratic leaders struggled to win over rebellious moderates and conservative rank-and-file party members who are demanding changes. The dispute has forced Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Calif., to postpone work on the legislation for three straight days while he negotiates with seven Democrats who are members of a group of fiscal conservatives called the Blue Dogs.

Waxman's committee is the last of three House panels trying to finish the \$1.5 trillion, 10-year legislation that would create a government-run plan to compete with private insurance, increase taxes on the wealthy and require employers and individuals to get health insurance. While the taxes would be levied starting in 2011, the expansion of coverage wouldn't come until 2013 — after the next presidential election

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., didn't rule out keeping lawmakers at work in August to get the bill done but said it might not be necessary.

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“I’m not afraid of August. It’s a month,” Pelosi said. “What I am interested in is the sooner the better to pass health care for the American people.”

“We will take the bill to the floor when it is ready and when it is ready we will have the votes to pass it,” Pelosi declared.

Hours of talks that included administration officials produced no resolution. House leaders could go around the committee and its reluctant conservative Democrats and take the bill directly to the House floor, but leaders said they didn’t want to take such a drastic step. “I don’t want to do that,” Pelosi said.

Underscoring the deep divisions among Democrats, members of the Congressional Black Caucus said that Obama and the leadership were making too many concessions to conservative Democrats. They requested a meeting with Obama.