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Idaho oddly quiet on health-care front

The state's congressmen haven't given folks many chances to shout about Democratic reform plans - but they all agree with the shouters anyway.

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Across the country, people are howling about health care reform, showing up at town hall meetings for raucous debates with senators and representatives home for their August recess. So why no health care town halls this month on the part of Idaho's congressional delegation? Even President Barack Obama has taken to the road to sell people on overhauling the county's health care system, with his own well-mannered town hall meetings this week in New Hampshire, Montana and Colorado.

For one, a screaming match of the kind seen recently in other parts of the country isn't particularly helpful to finding solutions for affordable and accessible health care, said John Foster, a spokesman for Rep. Walt Minnick, D-Idaho. "What we want is productive, substantive conversation," Foster said, "and not political theater."

And the delegation has made its position on the Democrats' health care reform plan abundantly clear (they oppose it), said John Revier, a spokesman for Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho.

"This is one of the places where everyone in the state knows exactly where their members of Congress are on health care," Revier said. "This isn't an issue that we've come to in the last two months. We've been hearing from them for 10 years on the issue. I think people know where their members are in Idaho."

Both Simpson and Minnick have said they will vote against the health care bill as it exists now in the House of Representatives. Even though their constituents know that, they still have plenty of questions - it comes up at every Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club and trade association meeting their bosses have been attending over the past several weeks, said Revier and Foster.

Minnick even faced a grilling at meetings this week of fellow Democrats, who have complained that the representative they elected last fall to replace a Republican hasn't been liberal enough on health care. Minnick, a freshman who landed squarely within the conservative Blue Dog wing of the Democratic Party, opposes a public, government-run health care option. Minnick does, however, support the fundamental aim of the Obama administration: scaling back health care costs and offering all Americans comprehensive, affordable health insurance.

Blue Dogs such as Minnick, from districts dominated by rural and small-town constituents, have expressed concerns to House leadership about the scope of the health care overhaul. Their objections have, in part, pushed the full debate to this fall.

Minnick's office is trying to set up round-table discussions on health care with panels of both experts and consumers coming up with practical ideas people can agree on, Foster said. Minnick's office this week also announced two telephone town halls - events that they believe will allow them to connect over the phone with

thousands of people, rather than just a few hundred that would attend a town hall. The Aug. 19 and 31 telephone town halls will focus on health care. (To get on the list, call Minnick's office at 888-3188.)

GOP Sen. Mike Crapo had four health care town hall meetings in the state in April, in anticipation of the issue dominating the national debate now, said spokeswoman Susan Wheeler.

But there's been such a clamor for more information in recent weeks that Crapo's office is trying to find a way to fit at least one additional health care town hall into his recess schedule, Wheeler said. The subject has dominated the telephone town hall meetings they've held this year, and they expect it will do the same at one scheduled for Sept. 16.

Crapo sits on the Senate Finance Committee, whose members are instrumental in writing what is expected to be the dominant Senate version of the health care bill. Earlier this month, Crapo signed an op-ed in the Washington Post with 12 other senators calling for bipartisan solutions to the nation's health care crisis.

He has expressed dissatisfaction with one of the current Senate bills, saying that it fails to provide affordable coverage for people who don't have it without affecting those who are happy with their existing coverage.

"Our present health care costs and spending are not sustainable and must somehow be reduced," Crapo said in July. "So far, we are failing to resolve either of these issues."

Sen. Jim Risch, also a Republican, doesn't have any town hall-style forums planned but said he is considering a telephone version because it's possible to "really get a lot of involvement that way." So far, people in Idaho haven't been shy about sharing their concern about the direction health care is headed, said Risch, who opposes most aspects of the overhaul as outlined by Democrats. He has called the Democratic proposals too expensive, as well as a potentially intrusive expansion of government.

As for whether he's worried about facing an angry crowd at a town hall, though, Risch says "not at all."

"The people that are at those town hall meetings that are giving the politicians 'what for' are on the same side I am on this thing," Risch said. "They have the same level of concern that I have about this. They're more vocal, obviously, than I am. I suspect that the people who would show up are on the same side I am."