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KMC's Morris addresses health debate

Baucus proposal might be best chance at reform

President Obama's vision for health care overhaul might not be palatable to every American, but this could be the country's last shot at rectifying kinks in the health care system for quite awhile, said Joe Morris, CEO of Kootenai Medical Center, on Monday evening.

"I think this is a key time in our history -- reform will happen this year, or not in the next five years," he predicted at his presentation on health care reform, put on by the League of Women Voters.

As Morris gave the latest updates on reform legislation and some possible outcomes in the Fox Auditorium at KMC, he pointed out that the most important national legislation is typically achieved during a president's first year.

"Next year is mid-terms, and the next year everyone is running for president," said Morris, former member of the board of trustees for the American Hospital Association.

Of the three House reform bills and two Senate bills currently proposed, Morris said he would place his bets on the version kicked out last week by Max Baucus, D-Mont, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

The bill is the most bipartisan, he explained, and the House bills will likely die in the Senate. "The interesting thing is no matter what the bill, there's opposition from both sides," he said. He gave a rundown of the Baucus bill, which would cover 94 percent of Americans and make it illegal for insurance companies to deny coverage or charge higher premiums based on pre-existing conditions. The bill doesn't include a public option, but instead would create nonprofit insurance cooperatives in each state.

The plan would also reduce the federal deficit by \$49 billion over the next decade, Morris added, by creating an excise tax of 35 percent and imposing fees on drug manufacturers, health insurance companies and clinical laboratories.

Obstacles will come to light as legislators start presenting more than 500 proposed amendments for the bill today to the Senate Finance Committee, though, he said. Prominent among controversial issues will be whether to add a public option, he said.

"It could be the Democrats who end up killing reform," he said. "It's quite a juggling act for (Speaker Nancy) Pelosi, because there are Blue Dogs who won't vote for it with a public option, and progressives who won't vote without it."

He emphasized the need for revamping the system, particularly with statistics showing health care as the primary cause of bankruptcy in the U.S. Being uninsured increases the chance of death by 40 percent, according to a 2009

study by Harvard University, he added, which also said that 45,000 Americans die each year due to lack of health insurance. "Other countries can't figure us out, why we're such a wealthy country and this still happens," he said.

If no reform occurs, he continued, Medicaid is slated to go bankrupt in 2017, and budget difficulties will plague both the federal and state governments. "The whole system collapses," he said. The question-and-answer period stirred surprisingly calm debate among audience members, who proved to be a mix of liberals and conservatives.

One man said the country is paying such high costs for health care because so much care is assigned to subspecialized physicians instead of primary care physicians. "It's a large part of the problem," he said. "We need to reform the whole system, it's not just about whether the government does this or that, or whether taxes will go up."

Another man worried about a national health care plan because of complaints from his relatives in Canada, one of whom waited six months for an MRI.

Patsey Parsons of Spirit Lake said her relatives in Canada don't mind a bit. "They do have to wait, but the government gets it done," she said. "They're scared to death to come down here."

Morris affirmed that he hasn't seen a trend in Canadians traveling down to the U.S. to get quicker service. "It's a different culture, they're willing to wait," he said. "But the U.S. system wouldn't be the same. We'll have our own system unique to us."