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Health care vote pleases Crapo

Senator encouraged by strong opposition to insurance option

COEUR d'ALENE -- After extensive debate, Idaho Republican Sen. Mike Crapo and other members of the Senate Finance Committee on Tuesday rejected two measures proposed by Democrats that would have added a government-run insurance plan to major health care legislation coming together in the Senate.

"I was really pleased that we were able to have such a strong vote against the government insurance option," said Crapo by telephone Tuesday from the nation's capital. "The debate and the vote showed very strong opposition from the entire Republican portion of the committee, but there was a clear division among the Democrats."

Crapo said the amendment proposed by Sen. John D. Rockefeller, D-WV, included a "pure government option," in which the government would have "defined products, set prices and become the insurance provider."

That measure was defeated 15-8 with all 10 Republican committee members voting against it, along with Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., committee chair and sponsor of an alternate plan. The second proposal considered Tuesday was defeated 13-10. Pitched by Sen. Charles Schumer, D-NY, it would have created another variation of a public health care option.

Baucus's health care overhaul legislation is in its second week of debate by the committee. Crapo said he strongly opposes the Baucus bill and argued against it in committee last week. While the Baucus legislation does not directly establish a federal insurance plan, Crapo said it has a "co-op" system that could lead to more government control of the nation's health care economy.

He's also concerned about the program's cost to states -- how it will affect their bottom lines with no guarantee of health care cost containment. The first amendment debated when the committee's mark up session began last week, Crapo said, was a requirement that the bill's language and the congressional budget office score for the cost of the legislation be available for 72 hours before the Senate votes on it.

"That amendment was defeated," Crapo said. "We are literally debating a bill that has not yet been written."

It's a concept paper, he said. There have been 500 amendments filed, and more are on the way, Crapo promised. He'll be bringing a proposal to expand protections in the bill for small businesses, so they don't face a heavy tax burden. Crapo believes the Baucus bill will make it out of the committee and onto the Senate floor for debate.

The finance committee bill will likely be merged with a reform bill that came out of the HELP committee (Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions) chaired by Sen. Edward Kennedy before he passed away, and several House bills that include variations of the public option.

"It's reasonable to expect the bill will move further to the left toward greater government involvement and could include establishment of a government insurance company," Crapo said. "As each of those steps is taken, the potential for bipartisanship is reduced."

Crapo said if they are able to stop the government insurance option in the Senate, there may be a chance to pursue Republican reforms that focus on fair market delivery of insurance so all people have access to care, "rather than whether we should nationalize our health care system."

Regarding recent criticism of his co-sponsorship of the Healthy Americans Act last year, a bill that would create a universal health care plan supported by public and private contributions, Crapo said it was the only bipartisan effort under way, and a way to get the discussion going.

He thought the act had some meaningful reforms, including the rejection of a government insurance company, although he said he couldn't vote on the bill in its current form.

"The bottom line is I made it clear that there were portions of the bill that I couldn't accept," Crapo said. "I wanted to promote the consideration of a bill that promotes an endorsement of the private sector delivery system."