

Idaho Statesman, Friday, Oct. 30, 2009 – by Erika Bolstad

Idaho's congressmen question health care bill

Both say they have concerns about costs and the inclusion of a public plan.

WASHINGTON - It's nearly 2,000 pages, so neither of Idaho's congressmen has had a chance to digest the health care bill released Thursday by Democratic leaders in the House.

So far, though, there's little to like, according to Rep. Mike Simpson, a Republican, and Rep. Walt Minnick, a Democrat in the conservative Blue Dog coalition. "They need to scrap this idea and go back to square one," said Simpson, who is unlikely to vote for the measure in any form.

But he also said that Republicans need to offer a good alternative. The GOP has been criticized as "the party of no" for not offering its own comprehensive health care overhaul bill. There are about a half-dozen Republican-backed bills out there, Simpson said, and he'd like to see GOP leaders put together the proposals into one that would serve as an alternative to the bill Democratic leaders hope to pass.

"I happen to think it's a good idea, and hopefully sooner rather than later," Simpson said. "We ought to have an alternative."

Minnick said he won't make up his mind until he reads more of the bill, but that he's "not enamored of" the inclusion of a government-run health care plan that competes with private insurers. He also said he was disappointed that the House bill has no opt-out clause allowing individual states to decide whether they want to allow such public option plans to compete with private insurers.

One thing Minnick liked: Under a government plan, reimbursement rates would be negotiated with health care providers instead of tying them to existing Medicare rates. Many lawmakers from rural areas and smaller states, including Minnick, argue that providers often are underpaid under Medicare. Idaho's reimbursement rates are low, Minnick said, and providers can't survive on those rates if government-backed coverage expands.