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## State health insurance meeting is set for I.F.

A topic that many lawmakers are predicting will be the hot-button issue of the upcoming legislative session will be front and center Thursday in Idaho Falls.

Beginning at 9:30 a.m., Department of Insurance Director Bill Deal will lead a two-hour public meeting covering the implementation of a state health insurance exchange. The meeting takes place at Red Lion on the Falls, 475 River Parkway.

Insurance exchanges were created by federal health care laws championed by President Barack Obama through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010.

The exchange would be a marketplace or a website where residents and small business owners could come to purchase insurance offered from a variety of providers.

Penelope Schwiebert, project manager for the Idaho Health Insurance Exchange Project, said the meeting will offer an overview of health laws and remaining next steps. Residents also will have an opportunity to ask questions and break into groups to consider options posed by the state.

"We wanted to make sure we heard from another round of voices of stakeholders before we go to the legislative session," Schwiebert said.

Once the proposals make their way to the Idaho House and Senate, lawmakers are expecting fireworks. "Health insurance exchanges will be the pre-eminent issue of the 2012 legislative session," said Rep. Erik Simpson, an Idaho Falls Republican. "I can't overemphasize this. I expect there will be a battle over this in the House of Representatives."

Simpson expects a battle because lawmakers are being asked to create a program that the majority in the Republican-dominated Legislature opposes. In March 2010, the state sued the federal government after asserting the federal health care program is unconstitutional.

Sen. Dean Mortimer, an Idaho Falls Republican, said he is wary of accepting or spending any money on a program the Legislature opposes. During the past legislative session, the finance and appropriations committee Mortimer sits on declined to accept federal dollars to institute the exchange early.

"The argument before us essentially was why would we show a willingness to implement the plan on the one side when we have already demonstrated our unwillingness to accept the plan on the other side (through our lawsuit)," Mortimer said.

Schwiebert said there is a January 2013 deadline for certifying a state insurance exchange, which means any significant action on a state plan would need to take place during the 2012 session.

Simpson said lawmakers essentially have three options:

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- They can move ahead, creating a state-run plan.
- They can do nothing and accept whatever plan the federal government comes up with.
- They can wait until the Supreme Court issues a health care ruling and the state lawsuit is cleared up.

Rep. Janice McGeachin, an Idaho Falls Republican, expressed concern as well. "The federal government is attempting to implement some of these changes in federal law through the state exchanges, so it's a thorny issue," McGeachin said. "A lot of people oppose the law itself."

In September, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter attempted to set the tone for how he wants the state to proceed when he authorized the state to seek federal funding to create and implement a state health care exchange.

"It's a difficult choice, but one I find far preferable to submitting to a federally established insurance exchange, with all the loss of control over our own destiny that entails," Otter said Sept. 20.