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The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Thursday Oct. 19, 2017
Wire Report
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Trump hedges on Senate deal on health subsidies

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Wednesday qualified his endorsement of a bipartisan Senate proposal to stabilize health insurance markets, even as the chief architect of the deal predicted that it would become law before the end of the year.

Trump on Tuesday appeared to give his blessing to a deal to restore health insurance subsidies that he had just canceled when the accord was announced.

Sens. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., and Patty Murray, D-Wash., agreed on legislation that would continue federal payments to insurance companies through 2019 to reimburse them for discounts they are required to provide to millions of low-income people who have coverage under the Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare.

On Wednesday, the president appeared to send a different message on Twitter: “I am supportive of Lamar as a person & also of the process, but I can never support bailing out ins co’s who have made a fortune w/ O’Care.”

But that message may have been more of a caveat than a rejection. Alexander, the chairman of the Senate health committee, said he received a telephone call on Wednesday from the president.

“He wanted to be encouraging about the bipartisan agreement that Senator Murray and I announced yesterday,” Alexander said.

Trump “intends to review it carefully to see if he wants to add anything to it,” Alexander said, adding that the president “wants to reserve his options.”

Alexander and Murray have already moved to address concerns that restoring the payments to insurers could be viewed as providing them with a “bailout.” On Tuesday, Alexander said that their deal would contain “the strongest possible language” to ensure that the money provided for the subsidies would go to the benefit of consumers, not insurers.

And on Wednesday, he took to Twitter to say he and Trump are in agreement on the cost-sharing reductions, or CSRs.

“He and I absolutely agree that CSRs should benefit consumers and not insurance companies,” Alexander said on Twitter, adding “The Alexander-Murray agreement has strong language to do that, and I will work with the president to see if we can make it even stronger.”

The measure is creating friction. House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, reflecting his most conservative members, came out against the deal on Wednesday.

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“The speaker does not see anything that changes his view that the Senate should keep its focus on repeal and replace of Obamacare,” said Doug Andres, a spokesman for Ryan.

But the authors of the measure may be gaining support for the moment that they have the most leverage. In December, the government will run out of money, and no bill to keep it funded can pass without Democratic votes.

At that point, supporters of the Alexander-Murray measure can insist on its inclusion in any spending bill and threaten to shut down the government if they do not prevail. Already, several Republicans have backed the agreement, including Sens. John McCain of Arizona, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska.

Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La. and the co-author with Sen. Lindsey Graham of the most recent legislation to repeal the Affordable Care Act, offered his qualified support: “If combined with greater flexibility to allow states to lower costs, this will set the stage for replace through a mechanism such as Graham-Cassidy. I will study this proposal to see if it accomplishes these goals.”

Alexander, speaking Wednesday at a forum convened by Axios, a news website, said: “The president engineered the bipartisan agreement by calling me and asking me to work with Senator Murray to do it. I’ve talked with him three times in the last 10 days about it.”

Alexander predicted that the plan would “pass in some form before the end of the year.” And he said the deal included several victories for conservatives, making it easier for states to revamp their insurance markets.

by Robert Pear AND Thomas Kaplan for The New York Times

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