

### House narrowly OKs Medicare drug plan

06/28/02

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Chicago Tribune

Despite intense dissension within Republican ranks, the House early Friday narrowly approved a controversial plan to provide a prescription drug benefit to seniors on Medicare.

The vote was 221-208, largely along party lines. Nevertheless, the future for a prescription drug measure is uncertain. The Democratic-controlled Senate is expected to take up the issue after the 4th of July recess, but the measure faces tough going in the Senate.

The issue is of great political importance to both parties as the midterm election approaches. Senior citizens will spend \$1.8 trillion over the next decade on prescription medicine, and they are more likely to go to the polls than other voters.

"Medicare is a false promise because it doesn't provide for prescription drugs," said Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.), an architect of the Republican plan.

But Democrats denounced the \$350 billion GOP bill as woefully insufficient to address the problem, and even some Republicans were reluctant to back it. Republican leaders spent most of the week trying to twist the arms of at least two dozen of their own members to support the measure.

The Republican plan would subsidize private insurance companies to provide prescription drug benefits to seniors with monthly premiums of about \$33 and an annual deductible of \$250. Insurers would cover 80 percent of a patient's drug bill from \$251 to \$1,000, then 50 percent of the next \$1,000. Seniors would be responsible for paying for all prescription costs between \$2,000 and \$3,800.

By contrast, House Democrats have proposed a more generous \$800 billion plan to cover seniors through the Medicare program with a \$25 per month premium and an annual deductible of \$100. Medicare would pay 80 percent of all drug costs up to \$2,000 and 100 percent of all expenses after that point.

#### Republicans criticize GOP plan

Conservative Republican lawmakers, such as Rep. Mac Collins (R-Ga.), complained that the GOP plan was too expensive.

Another group of Republicans said the bill did nothing to help lower the cost of prescription drugs, to help generic drugs get on the market or to import U.S.-made prescriptions that are far less expensive overseas.

Rep. Donald Manzullo (R-Ill.) argued that the plan would hurt small pharmacies, especially in rural areas. The bill would allow prescription plan sponsors to negotiate discounts with drug manufacturers and some pharmacies, many of which would require the seniors to receive their medicine through the mail, rather than from their local pharmacy.

### Leaders try to sway skeptics

Slowly, through a day of repeated procedural votes on the floor, House leaders privately considered ways to meet about a dozen lawmakers' concerns and gain their support so the bill would pass.

For example, Rep. Gil Gutknecht (R-Minn.) was offered the opportunity to conduct a hearing in the Energy and Commerce Committee examining the cost of prescription drugs inside and outside the country. Gutknecht had wanted to offer an amendment to the prescription drug bill to "reimport" U.S.-made medicine being sold at lower prices outside the U.S.

But Gutknecht declined to change his vote. "I'm not easily bought," he said. "They can't buy me. I don't want any new bridges."

Gutknecht said the Republican leaders' approach was "cynicism elevated to an art form" because they were arguing behind closed doors that lawmakers should vote for the bill because it will never become law. "I haven't budged," he insisted.

But House leaders expected others who shared Gutknecht's concerns--Reps. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.), Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.), and Anne Northup (R-Ky.)--to back down.

As Republican leaders worked to firm up their vote count, Democrats denounced them for refusing to allow a vote on the Democratic plan, known as a substitute in parliamentary parlance.

"You know why we're not getting a substitute?" asked Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.). "Because our substitute would win."

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) said Republicans would vote for the Democratic plan if they had the chance.

Democrats rallied with senior citizens and union members, waving placards that read: "GOP Rx Plan: A Tough Pill to Swallow."

Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), red-faced and yelling, called the bill "a sham, an illusion, a fraud." He said the measure was good for the pharmaceutical companies because lobbyists for the pharmaceutical industry had written it.

