

Public outcry raises doubts

Social Security cuts questioned

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional sources say that President Reagan's plan to slash Social Security checks for early retirees has stirred up such a public outcry there is little chance that 62-year-olds will lose benefits next year.

In public and in private, leaders in both parties are questioning the Reagan administration's political judgment over the way it sprang the plan, which calls for major reductions starting in 1982, especially for persons retiring before age 65.

Indeed, the administration on Tuesday appeared to be trying to step back from the package. Acting White House press

secretary Larry Speakes described the proposals as merely a set of "ideas" solicited by a House Ways and Means subcommittee. And he said he was "sure" they could be improved upon.

Sen. Robert Dole, R-Kan., on Sunday criticized the administration's timing in releasing the package and predicted, "We're probably not going to do very much very soon as far as the early retirees are concerned."

Dole, whose committee must pass on any legislation to shore up Social Security's sagging old age and survivors' trust fund, said, "Those who will turn 62 in the next few years probably

don't have very much to worry about."

Senate Minority Leader Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., said Tuesday that Reagan's advisers may have miscalculated in thinking the president's popularity would allow them "to unravel the Social Security system." Byrd added, "A new barrage of presidential cufflinks and Kennedy Center tickets (won't) put this one over" — a reference to the personal favors bestowed by Reagan upon Democrats who supported his budget guidelines.

A congressional source, who asked not to be identified, said the plan to pare early-retirement benefits from 80 percent to 55 percent of full benefits starting Jan. 1, 1982, "is two steps away from death now. If it had any chance at all, it would have to be phased in."

Reagan proposed cutting early retirement along with sharp cuts in disability and a change in the overall benefit formula that ultimately would

reduce all benefits 10 percent across the board. The package was designed to lift Social Security out of its current fiscal straits and to avert an even worse crisis 40 years from now.

Congress traditionally has been reluctant to make any rapid cuts in Social Security benefits. Even the slightest adjustment in the program can affect the lives of thousands of people.

But the unpopularity of the proposed change on early retirement does not mean that penalties will never be stiffened for early retirement, nor does it mean that the entire Reagan package will be rejected out of hand.

James Hacking, chief lobbyist for the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Retired Teachers Association, said, "Given the first-estorm reaction of people ... any kind of severe cutbacks in benefits in the short term (are) dead in the water. But as far as

long-term changes go, it's quite another matter.

"I think the administration is now sending signals that it is willing to back off a bit," Hacking said. "I think in the short term, the net result is going to be that they are going to have to provide the system with more revenue." His organization favors giving Social Security temporary authority to borrow from the Treasury.

Health and Human Services Secretary Richard S. Schweiker, who unveiled the administration's package May 12, was talking by week's end about its willingness to compromise. "We didn't come in with an absolutist view," Schweiker told reporters.

Robert M. Ball, former Social Security commissioner and leader of a group called "Save Our Security" that originally was formed to fight Carter administration changes in the program, said the Reagan cuts go far beyond what is needed to restore Social Security's health.

Deficit proposal passes first test

WASHINGTON (AP) — A proposed constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget cleared its first major hurdle Tuesday with an 11-5 approval vote by the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"The people of the country want it," said Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., "I believe we have a fine chance to get it through the Congress this year."

Asked about Reagan administration opposition to the amendment, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said he thinks Reagan will change his mind once Congress shows its determination to approve the amendment.

The proposal needs two-

thirds approval from both the Senate and House and ratification by 38 states. The amendment would tie any tax increase to the growth of the national income, unless Congress specifically approves a higher levy.

Meanwhile, the House Ways and Means Committee cut \$9.1 billion from welfare, unemployment insurance, Social Security, and Medicaid in an effort to bring spending in line with next year's federal budget.

The cuts, which include the controversial plan to delay next year's cost-of-living adjustments for Social Security recipients, is still \$116 million short of the budget requirement.

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