

# ...Stern backs Wyden's health care reform bill

(From Page 1)

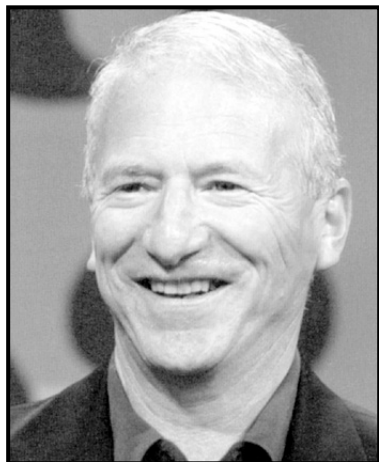
top five percent of income earners.

U.S. Senator Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) previewed his own detailed proposal Dec. 13, backed by an entourage that included Andy Stern, president of the 1.8 million member Service Employees International Union, and Steve Burd, CEO of Safeway.

Wyden's plan would leave insurers and the entire current system intact, but relieve employers of the burden of finding and managing health care benefits. Instead, employers would be required to "cash out" the value of existing health benefits over a two-year period, giving the money to all employees as a pay raise. After that, all employers would be required to contribute about 25 percent of the cost of their employees' premiums, with the remainder paid by individuals and the federal government through individual tax credits and direct subsidies.

It would be a health care benefit for all Americans equal to what members of Congress currently have, paid for on a sliding scale. Individuals earning less than the poverty level would pay nothing, while everyone earning up to four times the poverty level would get some subsidy. [The poverty level now stands at about \$10,000 for an individual, \$20,000 for a family of four.] Insurers would have to offer the same rate to everyone for the basic health benefit — no longer could they consider occupation, gender, genetic information, age, or pre-existing condition in price or eligibility.

To become law in the next two years, any of these proposals would have to be signed by President George



ANDY STERN



SEN. RON WYDEN

W. Bush, and they each differ significantly from the approach he favors — a shift to tax-free individual health savings accounts.

Meanwhile, the Oregon Legislature may pass reforms of its own, and will be looking at a grab bag of ideas, some major, some minor.

The highest-profile proposal to take concrete form thus far is the one developed by the Oregon Senate's special Commission on Health Care Access and Affordability, chaired by Senators Ben Westlund (D-Tumalo) and Dr. Alan Bates (D-Ashland). The commission, which included representatives from labor and business interests, met

throughout 2006 and released a draft in early December.

"Health care is crumbling around us," Westlund, a former Republican and independent-turned Democrat, told the Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board on Dec. 14. "Our health care system cannot be sustained five to seven years out. It's collapsing in on itself."

The Bates-Westlund proposal would create an Oregon Health Care Trust Fund, which would bargain with insurers on behalf of all Oregonians. The Trust Fund would then offer a complete health care package to every Oregonian who is currently uninsured — including medical, dental, mental

health and vision coverage.

Businesses and individuals would choose health plans from the list, and would share the cost of the premiums, which would be paid to the Trust Fund. Residents earning less than 250 percent of the poverty level would have their premiums paid by Medicaid, the state and federal program of health insurance for the poor. Many details of how the program would function still have to be worked out.

The Bates-Westlund proposal may seek access to money spent now by Medicare in Oregon, borrowing an idea from former Oregon governor John Kitzhaber. Kitzhaber and his group the Archimedes Movement have argued that the United States could provide a basic health benefit to every American for the money that's already being spent by the federal government on health care, if the money in Medicare, Medicaid, Veterans Affairs and the employer tax deduction were combined and spent effectively. Kitzhaber has proposed that Oregon lead the way by seeking waivers to use that money differently.

Bates, a medical doctor, told the AFL-CIO that their bill would focus on preventable care and keeping people out of the hospital.

He said under the current system, "insurance won't pay for preventive care, it won't pay for medications ... but

if you need a stent or a new kidney, they'll pay for it."

The Oregon Legislature will also consider a grab-bag of partial reforms intended to widen access and restrain costs. They include:

- Expanding a state program of insurance for children in low-income families, and paying for the expansion with an increase in cigarette taxes. Cigarette taxes would go up 84 cents per pack, matching the level paid in neighboring Washington; that money would get federal matching funds. Families earning above a certain amount could also buy in. Gov. Ted Kulongoski supports the plan, which was developed by State Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson (D-Gresham).

- Making insurance companies show cause before a rate review commission before they could raise premiums.

- Requiring hospitals to publicly disclose their prices.

- Strengthening the requirement that hospitals demonstrate a community need before costly expansions.

- Letting businesses join the state's prescription drug purchasing pool, which was made available to all individuals by a 2006 ballot measure.

- Creating a statewide health insurance pool for all K-12 school employees and some Community College employees.

**Broadway Floral**  
for the BEST flowers call  
**503-288-5537**  
1638 NE Broadway, Portland

**Southgate Mobile & RV Park**  
7911 SE 82nd Ave.  
Portland, Oregon  
Spaces Available up to 35'  
**503-771-5262**

**Danner**  
Quarry 8"  
Safety toe or reg.  
Gortex/Vibram. Black  
Try a pair on, you'll like them.  
Tough boots for the Northwest.  
**AL'S SHOES**  
5811 SE 82nd, Portland 503-771-2130  
Mon-Fri 10-7:30 Sat 10-5:30 Sun 12-6

Carpenters, Electricians, Laborers, Glaziers, Sheetmetal Workers, Floorcoverers, Bricklayers, Cement Masons, Roofers, Asbestos Workers, Family, Millwrights, Painters, Elevators, Plasterers



**IBEW AND UNITED WORKERS FEDERAL CREDIT UNION**

PO Box 16877  
9955 SE Washington St  
Portland, Oregon 97292  
www.ibewuwfcu.com

Glaziers, Carpenters, Laborers, Electricians, Sheetmetal Workers, Floorcoverers, Bricklayers, Cement Masons, Roofers, Asbestos Workers, Family, Millwrights, Painters, Elevators, Plasterers

*IBEW & United Workers Federal Credit Union would like to thank everyone who participated in our Holiday Giving Program. With your help we were able to provide gifts for every request on our tree.*

*All of the donated food and clothing also went to deserving families.*

*We would like to extend a special thanks to the Scoreboard Sports Bar for offering 30 meals to recipients of Albertina Kerr.*