

## SENATOR RON WYDEN ON HEALTH CARE, RUSSIA AND TRUMP

The Oregon congressman drops by Eugene Weekly for a visit

**B**efore holding his 54th town hall meeting of the year, Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden sat down with *Eugene Weekly* to answer questions about single-payer health care, the status of the Russia investigation and the Trump administration. Last week, Wyden joined Sen. Jeff Merkley and Rep. Peter DeFazio in a rally outside the federal courthouse in Eugene to oppose the proposed Better Care Reconciliation Act of 2017, the Senate version of TrumpCare.

Wyden told the crowd, “Two-thirds of the patients in nursing homes have their care paid for by Medicaid. This bill has a double age tax. If you’re between 55 and 64 you have to pay five times as much as a young person and you get fewer tax credits.”

As a former director of the advocacy group the Gray Panthers, Wyden says his background is working with the elderly. Though many of the organization’s branches support a national single-payer health care system, Wyden says he’s concerned about funding and about the transition from the Affordable Health Care Act to a single-payer system and did not say if he supported a “Medicare for all” type system.

“There’s going to have to be some money in the transition, which is what both California and Vermont, that looked at single payer, that was their problem. They could not find the money to make the transition,” Wyden says.

The senator proposes that employers give workers “the money that they have now spent by their employer on health care. It is a business write-off to the employer, it’s tax-free to the worker and that’s another part of the debate, but that would be the revenue that would finally provide the opportunity for a transition if the state wanted to go forward,” he says.

Wyden adds that there are two choices for a single-payer system. He says there are a number of bills that he’s currently looking at — like the bill proposed by Sen. Bernie Sanders. “You can have those bills and we all know that Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan are not going to be tripping over themselves to advance those bills. They will not have hearings on them, there will be no debate about them — that’s that,” he says.

The other choice Wyden suggests would be for states to pursue their own single-payer or public health care option via section 1332, a section he added to Obama’s Affordable Healthcare Act. The section provides innovation waivers so states currently have a variety of choices that don’t need authorization from the federal government. “If Oregon wanted to team up with California and Washington, we could have a West Coast effort where you would have progressives in three states where there would be interest,” he says.

Wyden is a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee. He pressed Attorney General Jeff Sessions during a two-hour-plus public hearing about Russia and asked about former FBI Director James Comey’s testimony. During the hearing Wyden told Sessions that he wasn’t answering the questions, saying, “Mr. Comey said that there were matters with the respect of the recusal that were problematic and he couldn’t talk about them. What are they?”

Sessions responded, “Why don’t you tell me? There are none, Senator Wyden. There are none.” When asked if Sessions was allowed to withhold that information by saying that his conversations with President Trump were confidential, Wyden says that he and “several other members asked about this and we asked under what legal authority are you doing this and they would say things like ‘it’s appropriate’ and the like.”

*EW* revisited a question posed to Wyden in January in light of new intelligence reports about the Russian election hacking. In January, when asked about Trump’s actions with regard to the travel ban and attacks on the media, he said, “Well, look, the president won the election.”

But since then, testimony from intelligence officials before the Senate Intelligence Committee has revealed that “a small number of networks were successfully compromised, there were a larger number of states where attempts to compromise networks were unsuccessful, and there were an even greater number of states where only preparatory activity like scanning was observed,” according to the testimonies of Jeanette Manfra and Samuel Liles with the Department of Homeland Security.

“So when I’m asked about this, look, I don’t see any evidence of this, but if Donald Trump thinks that there is evidence of this or anybody else does, you folks ought to sign on to take Oregon vote by mail national,” Wyden says. “My sense is that if you look at those states, those Midwest states, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and further east to Pennsylvania, Trump went there and showed up and Hillary Clinton didn’t — so that’s my take on what happened.”

As the president continues to communicate through social media where he has made false accusations pertaining to taped conversations with James Comey and continues to attack members of the press, *EW* asked Wyden how the president’s actions make him feel as a U.S. Senator.

“The founding fathers really thought that the free press in a lot of respects was more important than government if you go back and look at the writing. So I find this very troubling, these attacks on the press,” Wyden says. “I believe that America is strongest when we set the bar high, and the kinds of things that are coming out from the tweets don’t exactly fit that definition.”

Wyden wouldn’t speculate on who he thinks will run in 2020, but he says he will not run for president. He says he “has the best job in the world,” adding that he calls himself the designated driver of all the Democrats planning a presidential run. These days he’d need a “Greyhound bus” to pick up everyone running when before he just needed a van.

When asked about Trump running for reelection, he says, “I think that — if he gets through all this — he’ll definitely run again.”

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