

Senate GOP unveils Obamacare overhaul, but not all aboard

Hermiston insurer says changes to coverage unclear

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AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite
Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., joined by, from left, Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., and Majority Whip John Cornyn, R-Texas, speaks following a closed-door strategy session, at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday.

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans launched their plan for shriveling Barack Obama's health care law Thursday, edging a step closer to their dream of repeal with a bill that would slice and reshape Medicaid for the poor, relax rules on insurers and end tax increases on higher earners that have helped finance expanded coverage for millions.

Four conservative GOP senators quickly announced initial opposition to the measure and others were evasive, raising the specter of a jarring rejection by the Republican-controlled body. But Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., indicated he was open to discussion and seemed determined to muscle the measure through his chamber next week.

Release of the 142-page proposal ended the long wait for one of the most closely guarded bills in years. McConnell stitched it together behind closed doors, potentially moving President Donald Trump and the GOP toward achieving perhaps their fondest goal — repealing former President Obama's 2010 statute.

On Twitter, Trump said he was "very supportive" of the bill. On Facebook, Obama said at the heart of the bill was "fundamental meanness."

The bill would end Obama's tax penalties on people who don't buy insurance — effectively ending the so-called individual mandate — and on larger companies that don't offer coverage to their workers. It would offer less generous subsidies for people than Obama's law but provide billions to states and insurance companies to buttress markets that in some areas have been abandoned by insurers.

In Hermiston, a few people got together Thursday afternoon to learn more about Medicare through a seminar with employees from Hermiston's Simmons Insurance Group.

Attendees had questions about their own eligibility for the federal program, but didn't bring up the newly-revealed Senate bill.

"The Affordable Care Act didn't have a tremendous impact on Medicare," said Simmons' Josh Goller. "We expect the impact (of the new bill) on Medicare will be fairly minimum."

He said his agency saw

a slight uptick in questions and concerns about coverage when the House bill came out, and during the election, but said it's difficult to tell now how much locals will be impacted.

"It will take some time to go through the process," he said. "The other piece to look at will be, how will the state respond? Oregon was an early adopter of the Affordable Care Act provisions, and tried to be on the edge with Cover Oregon. It didn't necessarily work out the way people had hoped, but the general feeling is that the state is likely going to try and preserve something similar to what we already have."

McConnell must navigate a narrow route in which defections by just three of the 52 Republican senators would doom the legislation. He and others said the measure would make health insurance more affordable and eliminate Obama coverage requirements that some people find onerous.

"We have to act," McConnell said. "Because Obamacare is a direct attack on the middle class, and American families deserve better than its failing status quo."

Democrats said the measure would result in skimpier policies and higher out-of-pocket costs for many and erode gains made under Obama that saw roughly 20 million additional Americans gain coverage.

"We live in the wealthiest country on earth. Surely we can do better than what the Republican health care bill promises," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Four conservative senators expressed opposition but openness to talks: Ted Cruz of Texas, Kentucky's Rand Paul, Mike Lee of Utah and Ron Johnson from Wisconsin. They said the measure falls short, missing "the most important promise that we made to Americans: to repeal Obamacare and

the bill's cuts to Medicaid and drug addiction efforts. And Susan Collins of Maine reiterated her opposition to language blocking federal money for Planned Parenthood, which many Republicans oppose because it provides abortions.

Late Thursday, Trump tweeted, "I am very supportive of the Senate #HealthcareBill. Look forward to making it really special! Remember, ObamaCare is dead."

Obama was more than skeptical.

"If there's a chance you might get sick, get old or start a family, this bill will do you harm," he wrote. He said "small tweaks" during the upcoming debate "cannot change the fundamental meanness at the core of this legislation."

The House approved its version of the bill last month. Though Trump lauded its

passage in a Rose Garden ceremony, he called the House measure "mean" last week.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said under the House bill, 23 million fewer people would have coverage by 2026. The budget office analysis of the Senate measure is expected early next week.

The Senate legislation drew support from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which said it would "stabilize crumbling insurance markets" and curb premium increases. The American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association and AARP, representing older people, all criticized the measure.

The Senate bill would phase out extra money Obama's law provides to 31 states that agreed to expand coverage under the federal-state Medicaid program. Those additional funds

would continue through 2020, then gradually fall and disappear entirely in 2024.

Ending Obama's expansion has caused major rifts among GOP senators. Some from states that have expanded have battled to delay the phase-out, while conservative Republicans have sought to halt the funds quickly.

Beginning in 2020, the Senate measure would also limit the federal funds states get each year for Medicaid. The program currently gives states all the money needed to cover eligible recipients and procedures.

The Senate bill largely uses people's incomes as the yardstick for helping those without workplace coverage to buy private insurance. That would focus the aid more on people with lower incomes than the House legislation, which bases its subsidies on age.

lower their health care costs."

On the other hand, Sens. Dean Heller of Nevada, facing a competitive 2018 re-election battle, Ohio's Rob Portman and Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia expressed concerns about



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BRIEFLY

U.S. officials to lift Yellowstone grizzly bear protections

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Protections that have been in place for more than 40 years for grizzly bears in the Yellowstone National Park area will be lifted this summer after U.S. government officials ruled Thursday that the population is no longer threatened.

Grizzlies in all continental U.S. states except Alaska have been protected under the Endangered Species Act since 1975, when just 136 bears roamed in and around Yellowstone. There are now an estimated 700 grizzlies in the area that includes northwestern Wyoming, southwestern Montana and eastern Idaho, leading the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conclude that the population has recovered.

"This achievement stands as one of America's great conservation successes," Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said in a statement.

Grizzly bears once numbered about 50,000 and ranged over much of North America. Their population plummeted starting in the 1850s because of widespread hunting and trapping, and the bears now occupy only 2 percent of their original territory.

The final ruling by the Fish and Wildlife Service

to remove Yellowstone grizzlies from the list of endangered and threatened species will give jurisdiction over the bears to Montana, Idaho and Wyoming by July.

No tapes after all: Trump says he didn't record Comey talks

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump declared Thursday he never made and doesn't have recordings of his private conversations with ousted former FBI Director James Comey, ending a month-long guessing game that he started with a cryptic tweet and that ensnared his administration in yet more controversy.

"With all of the recently reported electronic surveillance, intercepts, unmasking and illegal leaking of information," Trump said in his latest tweets, he has "no idea" whether there are "tapes" or recordings of the two men's conversations. But he proclaimed he "did not make, and do not have, any such recordings."

That left open the possibility that recordings were made without his knowledge or by someone else. But he largely appeared to close the saga that began after said Comey "better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations."

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