Senate Dems lose health care vote, hope it's fodder

By ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Days after ending a turbulent Supreme Court confirmation fight, the Senate turned back to health care — with a battle squarely aimed at coloring next month's crucial elections for control of Congress.

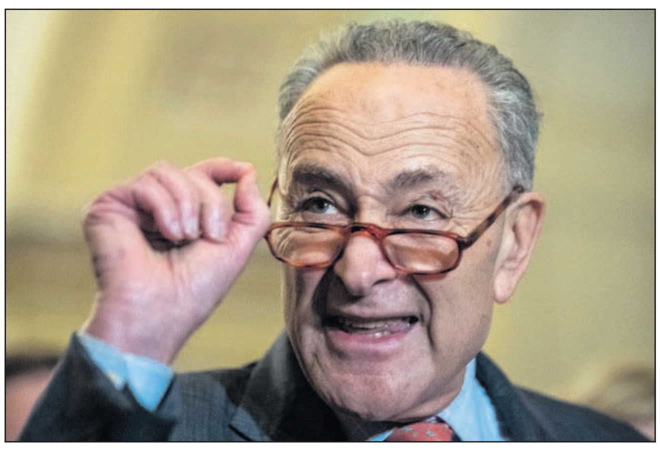
In a return to its characteristically more unruffled mode of work, the Senate on Wednesday rejected a Democratic attempt to stop President Donald Trump from expanding access to short-term health care plans, which offer lower costs but skimpier coverage. It was clear Democrats would lose, and a real victory was never feasible since the measure would have died anyway in the Republican-run House.

But by pushing ahead, Democrats made Republicans cast a health care vote that Democrats could wield in campaign ads for next month's midterm elections, in which they hope to topple the GOP's 51-49 Senate majority. The vote was also aimed at refocusing people away from the Senate's nasty battle over confirming Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, which both sides say has transformed indifferent conservative voters into motivated ones — for now.

Wednesday's vote was about showing whether Congress will "allow insurance companies to scam Americans with cut-rate health insurance," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "I wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of that vote."

Republican Sen. Cory Gardner of Colorado insisted it was actually the Democrats who had done themselves no favors with the vote.

"Look, if they want to take away people's health insurance and that's what they're campaigning on for the next several weeks, I think it's a losing strategy," said Gardner, who heads the Senate GOP's campaign organization.



AP Photo/Alex Brandon
Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., speaks after the Democratic policy luncheon Wednesday on Capitol Hill.

Using regulations, Trump has moved to let people buy short-term insurance that could last one year — and up to three years if renewed. President Barack Obama's health care law, which Trump and Republicans have weakened but failed to repeal, created more limited versions of those plans, lasting up to just three months. The policies are for people who don't get coverage at work.

The administration says premiums for the new short-term plans will be around one-third the cost of comprehensive coverage that Obama's law requires. Republicans have promoted them as a low-cost option for strapped consumers after years of steadily rising premiums, which they blame on Obama's law, and GOP candidates will be happy to use Wednesday's vote to make that point.

"It's not surprising that Senate Democrats are fighting to take away people's choices on health care to drive up premiums," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who's facing a surprisingly robust re-election challenge from Democratic Rep. Beto O'Rourke.

Unlike Obama's statute, the new policies don't require coverage for people with pre-existing conditions. The government has estimated those people number from 50 million to 130 million, making them a potent political talking point for Democrats. The short-term insurance also doesn't have to cover a menu of services like prescription drugs and could cap beneficiaries' benefits. Democrats call the plans "junk insurance" because, they say, the policies will leave unwary consumers purchasing dangerously meager packages.

"Anyone who supports coverage for people with pre-existing conditions should oppose Trump's expansion of these junk insurance plans," said Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., who is running for re-election and introduced the Democratic measure.

On its face, Wednesday's fight was over repealing Trump's new rules. But practically speaking, it served to renew attention on the overall issue of health care, which polling shows ranks at the top of the public's priorities and has been a major concern for voters for over a decade.

TRANSIT: Only 37 percent of Morrow County's workforce lives in the county

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Grant County and Pendleton, using the existing transit service, Grant County People Mover.

Principal planner Matt Hughart noted that statewide, 8 percent of households have zero cars. The same is true for Umatilla County, and in Morrow County, only 3 percent of households have no access to a vehicle.

Hughart also broke down the numbers of people that travel between counties to get to work.

Only 37 percent of Morrow County's workforce lives there, with about 28 percent commuting from Umatilla County.

Sixty-six percent of Umatilla County's workforce lives in the county but, as Hughart noted, people frequently travel across the county to get to work.

Hughart said the strategies address all targeted areas where there is a significant need, and that would serve the largest number of households and workforce.

According to the study, all of the strategies could be implemented by existing transit companies, such as The Loop in Morrow County or Kayak in Umatilla County.

Although the report laid out several specific transit strategies that the two counties could implement, Hughart said none of the details are set in stone.

He added that while plans could be implemented separately, they would be most beneficial to the region if they function as pieces of one larger system.

"They really should be considered as layers — all implemented one on top of the other," he said.

The report included cost estimates to implement all the strategies. Hughart noted that the cost to implement the Boardman-Hermiston shuttle was on the higher side — $250,000 to $300,000 — but would likely be the most utilized.

The funds would come from some statewide payroll taxes: the Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund (STIF), and the Special Transportation Fund.

Morrow County Planning Director Carla McLane said though both commissions may approve the plan this month, it may take some time to start implementing the strategies.

"I think the real question is, how much money is actually being collected through the tax program, and how much is going back to the local communities?" She said. "And which projects will we prioritize?"

McLane said there are STIF Advisory Committees in both Umatilla and Morrow counties that will make recommendations to the boards of commissioners about which projects are most relevant to the area. Though the strategies have been formulated for both counties, each county will approve the plan separately, and can make changes to it individually.

The report also suggested setting up park-and-ride areas, which would allow people in rural areas to commute to a more central location in their own vehicles, and then take public transit to work. Though it identified park-and-ride areas as lower priority projects, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said such areas could be beneficial to the region.

"It's about education and habit," he said. "We don't live in an area that embraces anything other than driving your own vehicle — I don't think people think about that. So I appreciate the inclusion of park-and-ride."

To collect commuting data, the firm surveyed businesses in Umatilla and Morrow counties, asking employers about the number of full-time employees at the company, the hours of operation, whether the company offers any type of ride-sharing program and if they think employees would utilize such a service. Twenty-seven businesses and groups from both counties participated in the survey, including many of the largest employers: Hermiston and Pendleton school districts, Good Shepherd Medical Center, St. Anthony Hospital, Blue Mountain Community College, Wildhorse Resort and Casino, and Port of Morrow Warehousing. Employers were surveyed, but individual employees did not provide information.

Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Elfering said while he thinks the plan is a good start, the second component is growing the workforce.

"I think this may help, but will it create a new worker? I don't know," he said.

Commissioners from both boards said they were happy with the increased inter-county collaboration.

"I think it's our third joint meeting, and I look forward to more," said Morrow County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay.