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[Site Topics](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

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Drug measure held up in House

Republicans hope to hold vote on prescription bill before holiday recess

By KATHERINE M. SKIBA
of the Journal Sentinel staff

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Washington - On one point, Republicans and Democrats agree: Few issues get senior citizens' blood boiling more than the growing cost of prescription drugs.

But the hopes of House Republican leaders to bring a prescription drug bill to a vote before the Fourth of July recess hit a stall Wednesday.

"They're in complete disarray," Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), top Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee, said of GOP managers of the bill, which had been scheduled for debate Wednesday on the House floor.

Jerry Kleczka, a House Democrat from Milwaukee, said the vote was delayed because Republicans don't have enough votes to assure passage of their measure.

Emerging from a meeting of Republican rank and file, House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) said: "We never have the votes until we're ready to move the bill."

Asked if he still planned to bring the bill up this week, Hastert said, "That's the plan."

The House is scheduled to adjourn for 10 days on Friday.

Greg Crist, spokesman for Texas Republican Richard Arme, the House majority leader, said Wednesday: "We've got a plan we know works, and we want to vote on it this week. Democrats can help us or get out of the way."

Quotable

“ If I were king, I would have written it a little differently, but I think it's a good bill. ”

- Paul Ryan,
House Republican
from Janesville

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The Democrats and Republicans have dramatically different approaches to help for seniors, an issue buttressed by election-year politics.

In the GOP measure, a voluntary prescription coverage benefit would be offered by private insurers and health plans that would be given a federal subsidy. In a Democratic alternative, coverage would be through Medicare.

Republicans envision a \$35-a-month premium and a \$250 annual deductible. People would pay 20% of drug costs up to \$1,000 and 50% of costs from \$1,001 to \$2,000. After \$3,700, all costs would be covered.

Democrats want a \$25-a-month premium with people paying 20% of costs up to \$2,000; Medicare would pay in full after that.

The estimated bottom line for the GOP plan is \$350 billion over 10 years vs. \$800 billion under the Democratic alternative.

GOP plan not 'perfect'

Mark Green, House Republican from Green Bay, is behind the GOP plan, saying the costlier Democratic version "will accelerate the fiscal crisis Medicare will face."

Tom Petri, House Republican from Fond du Lac, said of the bill Wednesday: "I'm not arguing that this is perfect necessarily, but I'm arguing that we ought to get off the dime and get something (voted) out of the House."

Paul Ryan, House Republican from Janesville, echoed Petri, saying, "If I were king, I would have written it a little differently, but I think it's a good bill."

Ryan said Medicare would be involved as the "arbitrator" of prescription drug benefit plans offered by private insurers. He said, too, that the GOP plan would give seniors a choice of providers and would not force those with existing coverage "to leave to go on a government plan."

And he is high on portions of the bill that he said would send millions more dollars to Medicare providers in Wisconsin. "A huge victory," he said.

Ryan, like Kleczka, sits on the Ways and Means Committee that crafted the legislation. Ryan then found himself this week answering questions while drumming up support.

The biggest obstacle? Conservatives balk at both spending too much money and expanding an entitlement program, he said.

Democrats slam GOP bill

But if some Republicans were muted in their endorsement, Democrats were high-fidelity in opposition.

From Tammy Baldwin, Madison Democrat, speaking last week from the House floor: "Unfortunately, the Republican bill is such a sham that it wouldn't even stand up to the scrutiny of a truth-in-advertising law."

Deriding what she termed "Republican smoke-and-mirror tricks," Baldwin said in an interview that the GOP was advancing the measure "with all of its weaknesses, simply so they can say to voters they tried to do something."

Baldwin maintains that the reliance on the private insurance market means there are no guarantees the coverage will be universally available. She and Kleczka point to the experience of Medicare+Choice. Once thought a viable alternative for consumers to the traditional fee-for-service Medicare program, such programs dried up when insurers found they weren't moneymakers, Baldwin said.

Kleczka said the GOP version "benefits drug companies more than seniors" and asserted that it represented "a continuation of the Republican plan to totally privatize the Medicare system."

Barrett optimistic

Tom Barrett, House Democrat from Milwaukee, acknowledged that the State of Wisconsin begins a prescription drug program for low-income seniors on Sept. 1. "But given the fiscal problems the state has, I would love to see the federal government come in and pick up the cost," Barrett, a candidate for Wisconsin governor, added.

Like other Democrats, Barrett has another gripe: the so-called "doughnut," a nickname for a gap in coverage in the GOP plan that means people with costs from \$2,001 to \$3,700 would have no coverage for this portion of their bills.

Ryan countered that those with low incomes - about one-third of the country's 40 million seniors - would not be subject to the gap; others would benefit from discounted drug prices that he said would result.

Barrett is rare for his optimism that the House will reach a consensus and that the Senate, where the parties also have sharp differences, will follow suit.

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