

Time running out for bipartisan health compromise

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President Barack Obama speaks at the AFL-CIO Labor Day picnic at Coney Island in Cincinnati, Monday, Sept. 7, 2009. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

(AP) -- Time is running out for a two-party compromise on health care as a bipartisan group of six Finance Committee senators considers a new proposal that might be the last, best hope for an overhaul agreement.

The six were to meet Tuesday on Sen. Max Baucus' proposal to create nonprofit insurance plans to compete with those offered by profit-making companies. The proposal by the committee chairman is noteworthy for the piece that's missing: a government-run alternative favored by liberal Democrats.

President [Barack Obama](#), who will address Congress and the nation on health care Wednesday night, told a Labor Day audience that it's time

for insurance companies to share accountability for problems in the system. He was not addressing the Baucus plan.

Four congressional committees so far have produced partisan plans for revamping the nation's [health care system](#). Baucus, D-Mont., said he would move forward with a plan if there's no bipartisan agreement by Sept. 15.

Baucus would impose a fee on insurance companies to help finance coverage for uninsured Americans.

It's not clear whether that would win support of two key Republicans in the group, Sens. Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Mike Enzi of Wyoming. The Baucus proposal reflected many of their priorities, chief among them the decision not to include the so-called public option to compete with private insurers.

Democratic sources close to the negotiations, who were not authorized to be quoted by name, disclosed the fee and other details of the Baucus proposal. One source said the proposal included suggestions from all six members.

A spokesman for Enzi said the Wyoming senator remains actively involved in the negotiations, and he is reviewing the Baucus proposal to make sure it keeps a handle on costs and focuses on concerns folks brought to his attention during August.

Besides establishing a new way to purchase coverage for Americans who have trouble getting and keeping health insurance, the Baucus plan would allow Americans to keep their own doctors.

[Health insurance](#) exchanges, with information on different plans and prices, would allow small groups and individuals to buy policies at lower

rates. Medicaid would be expanded to cover more low-income people. Nonprofit cooperatives would be established as an alternative to for-profit insurance companies, giving consumers more choices. Tax credits would allow low- and middle-income Americans to buy private coverage.

The package is estimated to cost under \$900 billion over 10 years.

If insurance companies passed the new fee along to customers, they would run the risk of losing out in a newly competitive environment, a source said, reflecting Baucus' thinking.

The package would make it harder to pass along this fee. Insurers would be required to release their administrative costs included in premiums and profits. That provision is designed to help customers determine whether they are getting a fair deal at a good price.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs, accompanying Obama on a trip to Ohio on Monday, told reporters the administration would be pleased if the Finance Committee throughout the course of the next few days would "pull together the strands of many different pieces of legislation to improve [health care](#) for all Americans."

One Democratic source said Finance Committee members were encouraged to suggest modifications, although Baucus advised senators that any proposals that would increase costs should include provisions to offset any increase.

Associated Press writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

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