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Reporting

Baucus Battered By Voters For Health Care Stand

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Sen. Max Baucus got some not-so friendly advice from his Montana constituents last week as he works to reform the health care system: You're doing it all wrong.

Baucus, the chair of the Finance Committee and the leader of reform efforts in the Senate, scheduled 20 town hall meetings with constituents across the state to talk about the future of health care. The Senate was out of session, but Baucus, a Democrat, didn't personally attend. Instead, he sent staff and a video-recorded message.

"I really want to hear from all of you," Baucus said on the video, according to local media. "You're my employers. You're my bosses. You're the people I work for. I'm just the hired hand. I want to hear what you want to see in any legislation we pass in Washington, D.C."

He got what he asked for.

Five separate accounts of the meetings, published in four different local papers, show Montana voters were downright hostile to Baucus' reform proposal. Baucus has been a staunch opponent of single-payer health care, a system in which the government would provide universal coverage.

Baucus has kept single-payer advocates out of negotiations and has yet to endorse a compromise proposal by Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) that would give Americans the option of buying into a publicly run plan that would compete with private insurers.

That stance put his staffers up against a wall, facing angry constituents fed up by what they viewed as a lack of courage in Washington.

"Majority wants single-payer health care," headlined an account in the Helena Independent Record.

At several of the events, Montanans' ire was directed at Baucus chief of staff Jon Selib, who defended the employer-based coverage system that he estimated covers 150 million Americans.

"A lot of people like that," Selib said.

When the time came for questions, [self-employed consultant Steve] McArthur stood up and asked a simple question. Looking across a standing-room-only crowd of about 275, he asked how many were happy with their employer-based health insurance.

Fewer than 10 people raised their hands.

"The [argument] is bogus," McArthur said. "It's not working for 95 percent of us."

In fact, any mention of single-payer health care insurance brought raucous cheers and clapping. Any other solution to health care reform - including Baucus' "balanced" plan that would create a mix of public and private plans - was received more coolly.

The bitter questioning led Selib to break some news at the meeting.

"If you think your insurance company is screwing you ... then you'd have the option of going to the public plan," Selib said. "Senator Baucus is fighting tooth and nail to include that in any final deal."

Then he asked the standing-room-only audiences for comments -- and got an earful, mostly on the whys, hows and whats of national health insurance as the preferred option.

Baucus' staff repeatedly argued that 60 votes are needed to move a bill through the Senate and that single-payer, or an otherwise bold reform, simply wouldn't pass. That wasn't what they wanted to hear, said a story in the Missoulian, "Single-payer health care: Baucus keeps getting an earful."

PABLO - Sen. Max Baucus' insistence that consideration of a national single-payer health plan at this point will squander a golden opportunity for health care reform in the United States continues to be met with stiff resistance from many of his constituents.

"The word 'insurance' does not equal health care," Janelle Kuechle of Polson

said at a meeting here Thursday. "If I have to pay a \$900 premium to have health insurance with a \$10,000 deductible, that is not health care."

"Congress ought to be representing us instead of the insurance lobby," said retired school teacher John Oberlitner of Polson. "Max Baucus has stated it's not feasible to pass a single-payer health plan, but one year ago people were saying it was not feasible that Obama could be elected our president."

Voters in Livingston weren't much warmer, recorded the Bozeman Daily Chronicle.

But many in the audience grilled a Baucus staffer on why they wouldn't allow single-payer advocates to participate in roundtables held to form his plan. Several doctors were arrested for protesting that point in Washington two weeks ago during a Baucus-led discussion.

Judy Moor of Bozeman asked whether the big campaign dollars Baucus has received from the insurance industry was reason for suspicion.

"Single-payer advocates not giving up the fight," observed the Great Falls Tribune.

Proponents of single-payer showed up en masse at the most well-attended meetings in Missoula, Hamilton, Anaconda, Dillon and Livingston to urge Baucus -- the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee -- to consider single-payer universal health care. Single payer -- a system in which the government provides health insurance to all Americans -- has been declared "off the table" by Baucus, Congress' leading man on health care reform.

Baucus isn't pushing hard enough, said a Helena business owner, summing up the statewide wisdom. "Max is really making me mad now because he's not really trying to change the system, he's just trying to tweak it."