

House Democrats patch up health care differences

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WASHINGTON (AP) Democrats on a key House committee said Friday they have patched up their differences on a health care overhaul, and went back to work confident they can advance the complex legislation.

"We have agreed we need to pull together," said Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Calif. Liberals, moderates, and conservatives negotiated late into the night Thursday to reach a deal that would restore some subsidies to help low-to-middle income people pay their health insurance premiums, would preserve a strong public insurance option, and would cut drug costs more deeply, lawmakers said.

No details of the deal were immediately available, but Waxman said he intends to formally present it to the committee later in the day, and the panel should pass the bill Friday afternoon.

The full committee resumed its deliberations on the sweeping legislation that seeks to hold down costs and provide health care to nearly all the nation's 50 million uninsured.

The last-minute agreement mollified liberals 'who were outraged by a deal Waxman struck earlier in the week with conservatives known as the Blue Dog Democrats. "We felt it was paid for on the backs of some of the people who can't afford health insurance now," said Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Col.

Lawmakers from both camps said Friday they were now in accord. "We need to get this done," said Rep. Baron Hill, D-Ind., one of the Blue Dogs.

As recently as two weeks ago passage of the bill by the Energy and Commerce Committee might not have looked like much of a victory. But after a series of delays and some rancorous disputes over President Barack Obama's top domestic priority, final House committee action on a health overhaul is sure to be hailed as a big step forward.

It comes on the House's final day in session before lawmakers leave Washington for their

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annual monthlong summer recess. With committee action completed majority Democrats will be able to return to their districts claiming momentum on health care even though up until recently the goal was to have legislation all the way through the House by the recess.

"The American people will have a chance to see what's in it for them, and our members will have a chance to discuss this with their constituents," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. "And when they come back in September, we'll take up the legislation."

The progress in the House was not matched in the Senate, where bipartisan negotiators announced they needed additional time to produce any agreement for their committee to review.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairman of the Finance Committee, said it would be September before the panel could act, a setback for Democratic leaders who hoped to wrap up all committee work before recess with final action in the Senate Finance Committee as well as the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

"The president, Leader (Harry) Reid and I share the goal of a bipartisan bill and we will continue to work toward meaningful, bipartisan legislation that can pass the Senate and become law this year," Baucus said in a statement Thursday after a day of uncertainty in which months of negotiations briefly appeared to veer off-course.

In the House, action in the Energy and Commerce Committee had been stalled for over a week as Waxman sought to quell objections from a group of seven fiscally conservative Democrats who hold enough votes on his panel to block action. Waxman succeeded Wednesday in getting a deal with four of the seven more than enough to allow him to move legislation forward but only by making concessions that incurred the wrath of House liberals.

The liberals were angry that subsidies to help low-income people buy care would be shrunk. They also said they couldn't support a proposed new structure for a government-run insurance option, which would allow payment rates to providers to be negotiated rather than based on Medicare rates as originally envisioned. The result could be costlier care.

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There was late-night drama in Waxman's committee Thursday as an anti-abortion amendment passed when conservative Democrats joined Republicans to support it then failed less than two hours later when Waxman used a procedural maneuver to bring it up for a second vote.

In the intervening time one conservative Democrat Rep. Bart Gordon of Tennessee changed his vote from "yes" to "no." And a second conservative Democrat who hadn't voted the first time Rep. Zack Space of Ohio voted "no." It was enough to take the amendment down on a vote of 29 to 30.

The measure would have specified that health care legislation moving through Congress may not impose requirements for coverage of abortion, except in limited cases.

The committee approved a Democratic-written measure specifying that abortions would not be required as part of government-approved insurance benefit packages. The measure, which passed 30-28, says health plans in a new purchasing exchange aren't required to cover abortion but that each region of the country should have at least one plan that does so.

The amendment also limits the use of federal funding for abortions. Democrats cast the measure as a compromise but Republicans mostly opposed it.

Associated Press writers Alan Fram, Ann Sanner and David Espo contributed to this report.

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