

WASHINGTON -- Midlands lawmakers are looking for more information about President Barack Obama's intentions on health care when he addresses them during a joint session of Congress tonight.

The debate is entering a critical phase after a monthlong recess period marked by overflowing, contentious town hall meetings.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said he'll be listening in particular for the president's reaction to a new proposal by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont.

Among the provisions in the Baucus plan: a requirement for every person to have health insurance. Not included: a controversial government insurance plan, the so-called public option.

Nelson, a potential key vote on the legislation, had said that he might be open to a public insurance plan as a fallback option that would be triggered only if the private sector fell short of certain goals.

Nelson said Tuesday that there are still unanswered questions regarding Baucus' proposal, including its cost, but that eliminating the public option altogether is a "positive step."

"I didn't see how you could structure a government-run option in competition with the private market and have it be a fair matter of competition," Nelson said. "Now we're not dealing with that."

Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., said he wants the details on Obama's plans.

"I am interested to hear the president's address and hope that he will finally fill in the blanks of his broad health care reform promises, such as specifics about how to accomplish health care reform that will actually rein in high health care costs, be deficit-neutral and guarantee that employees can keep their current plan," Johanns said.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, has been at the center of the debate as the top Republican on the Senate Finance Committee. He continued to call Tuesday for legislation with broad support.

"The best way to approach health care reform would be for the president to focus on building support for the kind of legislation that 70 to 80 senators would vote for," Grassley said.

Nebraska's House members, all Republicans, also stressed the importance of including the GOP.

"I would like to hear President Obama indicate a willingness to take the time to work with Republicans rather than insisting on a go-it-alone strategy for government-run health care," said Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said tonight's speech will set the tone for the coming weeks.

"Is it going to remain knock-down, drag-out, in-your-face politics, or is it going to be, 'Let's work together and get something done'?" Terry asked.

Terry said he wants to see legislation that fosters greater competition and makes health care more affordable.

"Take the public plan out, and let's look at what the other options are to get universal health care coverage for people that need the coverage and make it affordable," Terry said.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said Obama needs to recognize that most people like their current health insurance but not its rising costs. He said a new approach should focus on improving outcomes, reducing costs and protecting vulnerable people.

"Building a culture of wellness, strengthening the best of patient-centered care, and creating new insurance models may help meet these goals," Fortenberry said.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, wants to make health insurance premiums fully tax-deductible, tackle lawsuit abuse and make coverage more portable.

King said the country is uneasy, and he wants to hear more specifics tonight about what Obama does and does not support.

"Whatever he says is going to be listened to very carefully," King said.

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