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HEALTH CARE LAW; Health politics squeezes Ga. GOP

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HIGHLIGHT: Even supporters split on how state should work against overhaul.

To mark last week's anniversary of the nation's health care law, Gov. Nathan Deal held a news conference to slam the law and call for its repeal. He wrote an essay, too, recounting the "bruises and scars" he earned while fighting the law and predicting that it would cripple the state budget.

"No one would confuse me for an advocate of the law," Deal proclaimed.

Deal's fierce words came after a tea party assault accused him of not being strident enough in his opposition to the federal law. And he's not the only state lawmaker to face such an attack. Similar conflicts are playing out in other states, as conservatives wage their own civil war about the best way to take on the law.

"All sides agree with the end goal --- which is we don't want the health reform law," said David Merritt, a health policy expert at Newt Gingrich's Center for Health Transformation. "We want it repealed. We want it held unconstitutional. It's just finding the right means to the end. That's where some of the disagreement is."

After tea party objections in Georgia, the governor significantly shifted the course he had set for the state's handling of the health care overhaul. Deal abruptly pulled a bill to allow Georgia to plan its own insurance exchange, a key element of the federal law. Meanwhile, Georgia's Legislature became the nation's first to approve a "health care compact" bill --- an attempt to assert state control over health care.

The switch pleases Georgia's tea party leaders. But it worries some elected officials, consumer advocates and many who work in the health care industry. Failing to plan now, they say, could mean Georgia loses its chance to exert control over the state's health insurance marketplace --- something the Obama administration will handle if Georgia doesn't act.

The state insurance exchanges are a place where small businesses and individuals who don't get coverage at work could shop for a plan starting in 2014. That's when the federal law requires most Americans to have coverage. The exchanges would allow comparison shopping and could encourage competition. They would also be a way for consumers to get a subsidy to help pay for their plan or find out whether they qualify for Medicaid, the health care plan for low-income families.

Governors in Alaska, Florida and Louisiana are taking a hard line and refusing to plan for a state-run exchange. In South

Carolina, tea party efforts have prompted some legislators to retract their support for a bill that would create an exchange. In Montana, legislators have derailed legislation to create an exchange, but the state's insurance commissioner is still pushing for a Montana-run marketplace. In Oklahoma, a Republican governor who opposes the federal law faces attacks from some for her support for an Oklahoma-designed exchange.

Deal and Insurance Commissioner Ralph Hudgens have both agreed to do everything they can to fight the law. But they say the state must do what's best for Georgia in the event the law stands. The exchange would open in 2014, but Georgia would have to finish its work by 2013. Hudgens said that time line makes it crucial to start planning now.

"I would much rather have an exchange set up by Georgia and for Georgia than a one-size-fits-all federal government solution," Hudgens said.

A strong conservative, Hudgens finds it difficult to be lambasted by the tea party and is seeking a conversation with its Georgia leadership. "I want to say, 'What gives?'" Hudgens said. "I'm one of y'all."

Conservatives at leading think tanks differ on the issue, too.

Merritt, of Gingrich's center, supports Deal's pragmatism. "As he's noted, it's better to have Georgians control their own destiny," Merritt said.

But Michael F. Cannon, a health policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Georgia should shelve any plans for an exchange and return the federal planning money it received.

Cannon said it does not matter whether states lose the chance to create their own exchanges because the feds will set too many limits. He praised Deal for taking part in the multistate court challenge. "But there is a fundamental contradiction between what he is doing in court and what he is doing in the Legislature," Cannon said.

While the Georgia Legislature will not vote on an exchange bill this year, both chambers have already approved bills supporting a health care compact --- an alliance with other states with the goal of avoiding federal control.

"I believe the health care compact will allow us to begin having serious discussions about serious alternatives to the federal health care law," said House Speaker David Ralston, R-Blue Ridge.

The compact can't go forward without the approval of Congress. For that reason alone, even many conservatives view the legislation as more of a political statement than a real alternative.

"I can't really judge the merits of the compact, but I do fear it's a distraction from the very important work of fighting ObamaCare," Cannon said.

Democrats, too, argue that the compacts are more about showing opposition to Obama than support for Georgia.

Rep. Elena Parent, D-Atlanta, said making the issue political rather than practical will hurt Georgians.

"There are people in the Republican caucus who have this outside hope that this will be the solution to ridding us from the dreaded federal health care law," she said. "But it has no practical impact. It's a waste of time not to deal with reality and take action that moves our state forward."

While Ralston supports the compact, he hasn't ruled out an exchange. And he said lawmakers can educate voters about that option in the coming months. "We can explain what exchanges are about and why this is a Republican way to do health care," he said. "We'll certainly come back and visit that next year."

While Deal pulled the exchange planning bill, he hasn't changed his position. He has announced no plans to return \$1 million the state received to research an exchange. And he said he plans to appoint an advisory board to study a Georgia-run exchange before the Legislature convenes next year.

"If he does that," said Debbie Dooley, a leader in Georgia's tea party movement, "he's going to catch a lot of flak from tea party activists."

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