

The New York Times

The Caucus

The Politics and Government Blog of The Times

JUNE 26, 2011, 9:28 PM

Tea Party Plans Its Own Debt Panel

By *KATE ZERNIKE*

While the Tea Party movement has led the charge for cutting the national debt, its supporters have often struggled to explain how, exactly, they would do so.

Now some are out to change that, joining a Tea Party debt commission that plans to hold hearings over the summer, in the hopes of delivering recommendations to lawmakers by January.

The commission is being organized by FreedomWorks, the libertarian advocacy group that helped grow the Tea Party movement and mobilize it for the midterm elections. And its recommendations are likely to line up with the goals of that group, which in turn tend to reflect those of libertarian organizations like the Cato Institute. (FreedomWorks' motto is Lower Taxes, Less Government, More Freedom, and it has worked against environmental regulations and for increased privatization of health care.)

"If you look if you look at the landscape in Washington, D.C., there's a lot of Democrats who control two-thirds of the process who are now sitting on their hands, waiting to point fingers at Republicans who propose something, and there's too many Republicans who are afraid that the public won't understand a serious proposal to solve the budget deficit," said Matt Kibbe, the group's president.

"We think, like with the first days of the Tea Party movement, that the only way we will ever reduce the debt and balance the budget is if America beats Washington and Tea Party activists take over this process, take over the public debate and engage the American people in the hard work of making tough choices."

FreedomWorks held training for about 150 activists from 30 states at its headquarters in Washington over the weekend, with sessions dedicated to educating them about the budget proposals by Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky and Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, both Republicans who strongly embrace libertarian economic principles.

The activists, along with FreedomWorks staff, came up with parameters for their budget proposals, declaring that they would have to balance the federal budget within 10 years, reduce federal spending to 18 percent of the gross domestic product, reduce the national debt to no more than 66 percent of the G.D.P., assume that revenue accounts for no more than 19 percent of the G.D.P., reduce federal spending by at least \$300 billion in the first year and reduce federal spending by at least \$9 trillion over 10 years.

All this is a tall order; for example, the debt now equals nearly 100 percent of the gross domestic product. And with its limits on revenue — and the politics behind those limits — it is unlikely that the Tea Party commission will allow anything that looks like a tax increase.

The commission, to be formally announced Monday, is intended as a rebuke to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform that President Obama named, which delivered its recommendations last year. Those recommendations were met with generally negative reviews from both parties, who were unwilling to make the sacrifices that were called for. But the Tea Party commission is modeled after President Obama's, in one way — it, too, will have 18 members (though this one is unlikely to be bipartisan, as the president's was).

The members will be chosen from 18 swing states, and will hold hearings in those states over the summer, Mr. Kibbe said.

It will also have a strong crowd-sourcing component, much like the Contract From America, which Tea Party activists created, wiki-style, as a kind of manifesto for the midterms. (Those ideas had some influence: the rules that House Republicans passed after the Tea Party victories in the midterms included a requirement, lifted from the contract, that all new legislation had to cite the specific provision of the Constitution that authorized it.) The commission will solicit ideas and have people vote on them at a website, teapartydebtcommission.com.

It aims to have proposals ready by January, when the presidential campaign will draw even more attention to economic proposals.

Mr. Kibbe said that his group hopes the commission will present its ideas to the Tea Party caucus in the House and Senate at hearings in the winter.