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Deseret News

Long-term fiasco

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Deseret News editorial

When Congress passed the president's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi famously said, "We have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it, away from the fog of controversy."

Some of that fog lifted late last week when the administration announced it was scrapping the long-term medical and disability portion of the bill because it is not fiscally viable. We wonder how long it will take to determine the same thing about the rest of the bill, which stands like a huge boulder poised to roll down and crush a national economy already struggling against massive debt. If this one portion of the bill is not fiscally viable, how can the administration keep a straight face when discussing the rest of it?

Earlier this year, the government's own health care actuary, Richard Foster, estimated the new law would increase health care spending by \$300 billion during its first 10 years. But even that figure is tempered by the law's unrealistic assumptions, such as the imposition of caps on physician reimbursements. A Cato Institute study put the law's cost at \$823 billion during the first 10 years, all adding to a debt burden that already has financial markets worried.

The long-term medical and disability plan was a pet project of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy. It was supposed to provide benefits for people who were disabled by illness or accident. Anyone who had paid at least five years of premiums would receive a stipend of at least \$50 a day, which could go toward in-home health care and support.

But the plan's fatal flaw was that participation was voluntary. The administration concluded the program would not collect enough in premiums to cover its costs. Foster had predicted this already in April 2010, estimating the program would begin losing money in 2025.

The private insurance market relies on voluntary participation, of course. People do not have to sign up. But the massive Affordable Care Act, which filled more than 2,400

pages at the time it was passed, cannot succeed on a voluntary basis. That is why it mandates that all Americans purchase insurance and that employers provide government-approved insurance. That's also why it taxes so-called high-end insurance policies.

If the U.S. Supreme Court were to strike that mandate as unconstitutional, the entire law likely would go the way of the long-term and disability portion.

With a bipartisan supercommittee struggling against existing entitlements to cut \$1.2 trillion from the federal budget over the next 10 years, Americans ought to hope for the health care law's demise. The United States does indeed have a health-care problem centered on rising costs that exclude many people. The Affordable Care Act is not a solution to that problem. It is a testament to the foolishness of quickly passing a highly partisan bill without really understanding what it contains.