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Healthcare battle begins

By Joseph Picard

House Republicans wasted no time in going after President Obama's healthcare reforms of 2010.

As expected, Rep. John Boehner, R-OH, was elected the Speaker of the House and, in a festive mood, swore in the new members en masse.

Already drawn up, although as yet lacking an official bill number, was the title page of a measure "To repeal the job-killing health care law and health care-related provisions in the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010."

The bill is sponsored by Rep. Eric Cantor, R-VA, who is the new House Majority Leader. Although it currently contains nothing more than its working title -- Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act - the document is accompanied by a resolution, "instructing certain committees to report legislation replacing the job-killing health care law."

The House committees thus instructed are those of Education and the Workforce, Energy and Commerce, the Judiciary, and Ways and Means. Their instructions are to propose legislation changing "existing law within each committee's jurisdiction" to provide "economic growth and private sector job creation by eliminating job-killing policies and regulations."

Some of the directives committee members are given -- to present ways to let people keep health plans they have and like if they choose, let people with pre-existing conditions get affordable health care and reform the medical liability system to reduce wasteful spending - are, Democrats would say, already in the law. But what committees specifically recommend may not be what Democrats have in mind.

Other provisions committee members are instructed to present -- lower costs through increased competition, provide states greater flexibility in administering Medicaid, expand incentives to encourage personal responsibility for health care coverage and costs, prohibit taxpayer funding of abortions, and not accelerate the insolvency of entitlement programs or increase the tax burden on Americans - signal changes more in keeping with expressed Republican ideas.

According to the new schedule, the House will take up the repeal of the healthcare reform next week and a vote is expected before the week is out.

Should the House pass a repeal, as expected, the Senate, where Democrats are still in control, is likely to reject it. House Republicans plan to then attack the law provision by provision.

President Obama has said he will veto any repeal of the reform.

Cantor, in a published interview, said that, contrary to reports that Republicans are facing solidarity problems, repealing healthcare reform will draw some Democrats to vote with Republicans and reveal how that party is in disarray.

In a reeling economy where unemployment hovers near 10 percent, Republicans

carried the 2010 mid-term elections by criticizing the Democrats and the Obama administration on an inability to create jobs and promised jobs if put in power.

Republicans do not have, however, a jobs creation bill, per se.

Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said that such a measure would be contrary to Republican philosophy.

"Republicans do not believe that government should be in the business of trying to directly create jobs through things like stimulus packages," Tanner said, adding that the expectation is that jobs will be created when the private sector is freed from enough taxes and government regulation to expand business operations.

Republicans are also pledged to not raising taxes, so that any increase in revenues can only come through cutting existing spending.

Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute, said Republicans may be making a political mistake based on ideology.

"They are saying they have a mandate for cutting spending," Marshall said. "But the mandate they received from the elections was to fix the economy. There's a difference. If they go too far with austerity measures before the recovery becomes real, they will hurt the economy and themselves."

Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, in an op-ed published today, said there isn't a "worse idea for American families" than repealing healthcare reform.

"The law is giving Americans more freedom in their health care choices. It's freeing families from the worry that they'll lose their benefits when insurers unfairly cancel or cap their coverage. It's freeing children with disabilities and pregnant women from being discriminated against by insurers because of their health status. It's freeing seniors to get the care they need, whether it's a prescription medication or a preventive screening like a mammogram. It frees all of us to look for a new job or start our own business without worrying about losing health coverage.

"Repeal would slam the brakes on this progress," she said.