

Biff! Pow! MIT economist turns to comic book format to help explain Obama health care law

BOSTON (AP) — Pow! Biff! Krakk!

An MIT economist and adviser to President Barack Obama is turning to comic books to help make the pitch for the administration's embattled health care law.

Jonathan Gruber said he was hesitant at first when a book publisher approached him with the idea of translating the complex new law into a genre more typically populated by superheroes in tights.

But Gruber said his family, particularly his comics-obsessed 16-year-old son, convinced him that the pulpy panache of the graphic novel format would be an ideal way to help explain the law to ordinary readers.

Don't expect caped crusaders, evil geniuses and secret plans of world domination, although Gruber concedes he's on a rescue mission of sorts: defending the law from what he calls the "ugly, evil rhetoric" of critics.

"When people understand the bill, they like it," he said. "That's a great position for an academic to be in. I don't have to lie or twist anything to get my point across; I just have to explain what this (law) is about."

Gruber said that while many people are skeptical about the new law, they tend to come around once the details are explained to them.

Gruber said he was nervous at first that his fellow academics might shun his foray into pop culture, but said those worries were quickly overridden by his family once he told them of the idea.

"At first I said 'No, I don't have the time,'" Gruber said. "Then my family said, 'You're crazy,' and the more I thought about it, the better the idea sounded."

Gruber is no novice to the health care debate.

He worked with former Republican Gov. Mitt Romney on Massachusetts' landmark 2006 health care law which provided a blueprint for the national law. He has also worked as an adviser to Obama and serves on the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority Board, which oversees the state law.

The book, due to hit the shelves in September, is being published Hill & Wang, a subsidiary of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

It also carries a far wonkier title than most comics, "Health Care Reform: What It Is, Why It's Necessary, How it Works."

The idea of tackling a weighty topic in the world of comics may not be as unusual as it sounds.

The graphic novel has been used to illustrate everything from life on the West Bank and Gaza

Strip in the early 1990s to the 9/11 Commission report. In 1992, illustrator Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize for his Holocaust-inspired comic "Maus."

Craig Gardner, a comic book aficionado and former manager of The Million Year Picnic, a comic book store in Cambridge, Mass. said comic books and graphic novels have come a long way since Archie.

He said there's no reason why a complex topic like health care can't be tackled by the genre.

"Something like the health care law, I don't understand it. It's this long thing with a lot of whistles and bells and after a while you start to fade out," he said. "Putting it in a visual medium is one way of making it more immediate."

Gruber is letting an illustrator chosen by the publisher handle the book's images. His task was to deliver a 25-page manuscript explaining the law — what Gruber called "a defensible text that is fact-based."

That manuscript was handed off to a second writer who must translate it into comic book lingo.

Even those who oppose the new law say they're curious about Gruber's comic.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute called the new law a disaster for patients, doctors and health care providers.

"Given what we know about the health care bill in the last year, he might want to title it The Dark Knight," Tanner said. "We've had about 1,000 Democratic strategies for how to sell this and the comic book is one more."

Asked if he'd read it, however, Tanner said "Sure."