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We all must pay our fair share

By: Billy McWilliams and Bethany Letiecq

One of the greatest falsehoods repeated by Rep. Denny Rehberg and tea party leaders is that Social Security is bankrupt. This lie is used to distract us, and will only come true if we allow its \$2.7 trillion trust fund to be dismantled or privatized and invested in a volatile stock market.

Social Security yesterday celebrated its 76th birthday. As the primary safety net of Americans, it is a strong and healthy program with \$2.7 trillion in its trust fund today, and can pay all promised benefits in full for the next 25 years. Even after that, it can fund 77 percent of promised benefits.

One of the greatest falsehoods repeated by Rep. Denny Rehberg and tea party leaders is that Social Security is bankrupt. This lie is used to distract us, and will only come true if we allow its \$2.7 trillion trust fund to be dismantled or privatized and invested in a market.

Social Security is ours and our money is safely invested in bonds U.S. Treasury. Some in Congress and the media have disparaged the entitlement program as an as though it, were an undeserved gift. But we are indeed entitled to it, after paying into the trust fund in small increments over a lifetime of labor. Our employers have matched these contributions dollar for dollar for generations. Social Security is the primary safety net for Americans in the event of disability, death or old age, and is the primary insurance program for 95 percent of Montana children.

Social Security benefits all of us indirectly and goes largely unnoticed. For instance, one in five Montanans receives some sort of Social Security benefit, which puts \$2.2 billion each year into our economy. These funds pay for basic living expenses like rent/ mortgage payments, groceries, gas, utilities, and essential services that further support our communities. This money circulates in our communities; it isn't saved or tucked away.

It lifts Montana's seniors out of poverty. Currently, 8.1 percent of seniors live in poverty, but without Social Security, that would skyrocket to an estimated 56 percent. And nobody is getting rich from the benefits. The median benefit for retirees is just \$13,200. Two out of three senior citizens rely on Social Security for at least half of their income and one-third rely on it for 90 percent or more.

If these same seniors were unable to financially afford to retire, staying in jobs past retirement age, the career prospects of young people would further diminish. Many bright, energetic workers would be locked out of tighter job markets occupied by older people

unable to retire without Social Security. Today more than ever, we must find a way to balance the needs of all our citizens. Social Security is a part of the solution.

Why are we being frightened into thinking Social Security is a vulnerable program? This comes from libertarian and right-wing organizations like the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation. These groups, subsidized by the wealthy, including the Koch brothers and their \$44 billion, produce policy papers that take aim at dismantling Social Security among other safety net programs. Their ideas are then heavily publicized by the media and provided as talking points to politicians like Rep. Rehberg who seek to undercut the lower and middle classes for the gain of a few. And that's the point. These rich folks keep getting richer while the rest of us lose.

Politicians will be meeting in Washington to decide how to fix the economy. No doubt, Social Security will be a target. But rather than balance the budget on the backs of the poor and most vulnerable, let's work together to strengthen Social Security for the long term. Rather than capping Social Security contributions at \$106,800 of income earned, let's simply collect taxes on all earnings above \$106,800. This policy change would affect only 6 percent of the wealthiest Americans, and the Social Security program would be fully solvent for 75 years or more.

Sens. Jon Tester and Max Baucus have strongly stated that they believe in protecting Social Security. Congressman Denny Rehberg, taking his cues from the wealthy, has voted over and over again to dismantle the program.

It's a matter of priorities and choice: tax cuts for the rich or full benefits for everyone. Let's return to the days when we each paid our fair share. It's up to us. Make your voice heard.

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