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## Senate panel, finally, is set to deliver a bill

### Key committee's health plan cost: \$880 billion. Efforts continued to ensure bipartisan deal.

By Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar

Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Senate health care negotiators said yesterday they've cut the cost of their 10-year coverage plan to under \$880 billion as they labored for an elusive bipartisan deal with just a day or so left after months of talks.

Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D., Mont.) said he'll have a formal proposal by midweek - maybe as early as today - to meet a deadline for moving ahead on President Obama's top domestic priority with or without Republican support.

At the same time, Baucus said, the bipartisan talks could continue even as his Finance panel begins its formal bill-drafting session next week. Talks continued during the day yesterday, and more were expected today.

But even after Baucus spoke optimistically of gaining bipartisan backing, lawmakers continued to haggle over a question at the heart of the debate:

How can the government force people to buy insurance without imposing a huge new financial burden on millions of middle-class Americans?

Even within his own party, Baucus confronted a fresh wave of concern.

Sen. Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) declared himself dissatisfied with the chairman's plan, which, like other congressional reform proposals, would require every American to buy health insurance by 2013.

"Additional steps are going to have to be taken to make coverage more affordable," he said, "and my sense is that will be a concern to members on both sides of the aisle."

Under the Baucus plan, described in a "framework" released last week, as many as 4 million of the 46 million people currently uninsured would have to buy coverage on their own, without

government help.

Millions more would qualify for federal tax credits, but could still end up paying as much as 13 percent of their income for premiums - far more than most Americans now pay for coverage.

"We're talking about the equivalent of a middle-class tax increase," said Michael D. Tanner, a health-care expert at the libertarian Cato Institute. "Yes, they're paying it to an insurance company instead of to the government. But, suddenly, these people are paying more money to somebody."

Baucus' small group of three Democrats and three Republicans has been working for weeks in hopes of finding a bipartisan path toward guaranteeing coverage for all and trying to control the rise in health-care spending.

Staff aides on both sides said the negotiators are close, but it's unclear if they'll get agreement.

The three Republicans - Mike Enzi of Wyoming, Chuck Grassley of Iowa, and Olympia Snowe of Maine - are under intense pressure from leaders of their own party, some of whom have publicly dismissed Baucus' framework as a Democratic plan.

Baucus may not be able to get any of the them to agree, though he seems to have a chance of persuading Snowe.

Yesterday, the negotiators said they discussed illegal immigration, benefits for the poor, medical malpractice, and restrictions on abortion coverage.

Sen. Kent Conrad (D., N.D.) said they're close on a verification system to prevent illegal immigrants from getting government subsidies to buy health coverage.

"We're very close to conclusion on how to prevent people who are here illegally from benefiting," he said.

Negotiators also said they've found ways to reduce the cost of a planned expansion of Medicaid to cover more people near the federal poverty line.

The issue is critical to winning support from governors, since the states share in the cost of the program.

On medical malpractice, Conrad said they agreed the federal government should provide funding for states to experiment with a range of alternatives to lawsuits.

New consumer protections would prohibit onerous insurance companies practices, such as denying coverage because of a prior health problem, or charging more to those who are sick.

The action is being closely watched by Democrats in the House, many of whom want to see the direction the Senate Finance Committee takes before moving forward with floor votes on their bill, which three House committees approved in July.

This week, Obama is taking his health-care campaign just down the road from the White House, with a rally Thursday at the University of Maryland, in College Park, Md.

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