

Perriello defends health care bill as Republicans attack

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Rep. Tom Perriello, D-5th District, said Monday that people who have insurance will pay smaller premiums for better care under the health reform bill that passed the House of Representatives on Saturday night with his support.

Republicans, including Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-6th District, continued to describe the bill as a deficit buster and job killer.

Perriello avoided talking about Gov.-elect Bob McDonnell's concern that the bill's public-option requirement for health insurance wasn't right for Virginia.

Perriello said he would wait for the Senate's changes to the bill, including a potential new version of its public-option provision, before discussing whether Virginia and other states should make their own choices on the public option.

Debate continued to swirl Monday about whether the health-care bill will cost people more, or less, money.

Perriello and Goodlatte presented starkly different versions of the bill's impact.

Perriello said economists expect savings of \$1,000 to \$5,000 per family for people who now pay for health insurance.

Perriello also stuck with a Congressional Budget Office estimate that the bill would reduce the national deficit. "The CBO is the arbiter on the field. They say this will reduce the deficit," Perriello said.

Goodlatte said the bill "contains over \$1 trillion in new spending."

"It is estimated that as many as 114 million Americans could lose their current coverage under the bill," Goodlatte said.

"It is also estimated that the legislation will raise \$800 billion in new taxes and will kill as many as 5.5 million jobs, primarily in small businesses."

A conservative group, Americans for Limited Government, went further, calling the bill "a \$2.1 trillion takeover of the nation's health care system."

Perriello said the bill would help small businesses provide health insurance to employees, and Collinsville business owner Ellen Jessee joined in on the conference call to say that she expected the measure to reduce premiums for her and her 10 employees.

"One thing that would help us is the ability to pool with other businesses to purchase insurance through an

exchange and get a more reasonable rate,” Jessee said.

Also, the bill would allow businesses with 25 or fewer employees “to qualify for a tax credit, and that would really be helpful,” Jessee said.

Medicare recipients also can benefit from the bill in several ways, Perriello said.

Under the bill, Medicare will provide free preventive and wellness care, improve primary and coordinated care, improve nursing home quality, and cover \$500 of the “doughnut hole” drug costs the first year, Perriello said.

It would strengthen the Medicare Trust Fund that some seniors use, and potentially reduce the cost of prescription drugs, he said.

Goodlatte said, “The Democrat health care bill would cut Medicare for the nation’s seniors by \$500 billion.”

If the dollar amounts that were tossed around in the national debate Monday seemed confusing, it’s because “we still don’t have the, quote, ‘scoring’ on it,” said Charles Dunn, dean of Regent University’s school of government. Republican Gov.-elect McDonnell graduated from Regent’s school of law.

Dunn suggested that instead of using CBO numbers, people should check out figures from the conservative think tanks Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation. Neither group indicated Monday that it had fully analyzed costs of the bill.

“They are more likely to be right; history tells us that,” Dunn said, because the 1964 estimates of costs used by advocates of Medicare and Medicaid were “not even close to being right.”

“These entitlement programs always get out of hand, you can count on that,” Dunn said.

Perriello said the health care bill is not an entitlement program. Instead, it is a competition program for health insurance, Perriello said.

“One of the big victories I saw in this bill was getting rid of the anti-trust monopoly protections the insurance industry has enjoyed,” Perriello said.

“This is not a country that is built on monopoly, it is built on competition, and I think freeing up the market that way is going to bring more insurance providers for Ellen’s company and others,” Perriello said, referring to Jessee’s land-surveying business.

Outright political attacks also were part of the debate Monday, with the National Republican Congressional Committee saying Perriello’s vote for the bill guaranteed his defeat in the 2010 election.

“Tom Perriello’s career was pronounced dead at 11:16 p.m. EST on Nov. 7, 2009,” read an e-mail from Andy Sere, NRCC spokesman. Sere followed that message with 11 more e-mails criticizing Perriello.

The Albemarle County native didn’t flinch in the news conference Monday.

“The single most important thing to my re-election is going to be what the economy looks like next year,” said Perriello, whom the Republican Party has targeted as the nation’s most vulnerable Democratic congressman.

Democrats countered Monday with their own hit list of 32 Republicans who voted for the bill, including Virginia Reps. Randy Forbes of Chesapeake and Frank Wolf of Herndon.