

Social Security Briefing

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CONGRESS DAILY AM

27 July 2005

President Bush met privately at the White House Tuesday with business officials and student activists to talk about his efforts to enact changes to Social Security.

The president promoted payroll-tax funded personal retirement accounts and talked about the need to improve the solvency of Social Security, according to officials who were present.

With Congress still not ready to act on legislation and some senior Republicans even talking about taking up only a limited bill, the White House is seeking to maintain pressure for its proposal, which calls for private accounts and limits on benefit increases as a way to improve solvency.

Though the event was not announced or televised, Bush spoke for about 30 minutes.

"It underscores, I have to conclude, that he is determined," said National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors President Dirk Van Dongen. "As he has done in other places and other times, he made it extremely clear that it is a high priority."

In the audience were about 75 to 80 business officials and about 150 members of Students for Saving Social Security, according to Business Roundtable spokeswoman Tita Freeman.

Students for Saving Social Security supports payroll-tax funded accounts and seeks solvency measures that do not include tax increases.

Also present were officials from the Financial Services Roundtable, the National Association of Manufacturers, the BRT and other members of the business-backed Coalition for the Modernization and Protection of Medicare.

The president promised to continue traveling and talking about the issue, Freeman said.

On Capitol Hill, Ways and Means Republicans Tuesday said key aspects of their Social Security strategy remain unresolved, but they vowed to push ahead with their effort in September.

At a news conference, Ways and Means Social Security Subcommittee Chairman Jim McCrery, R-La., said decisions have not been made yet on whether solvency measures would be included in retirement legislation that Ways and Means Chairman Thomas plans to unveil in the fall.

He said it also was unclear whether their legislation, which he and other Republicans touted today, would be part of the retirement package, or whether they would run separately in the committee and on the floor.

The accounts would establish private investment accounts by using the Social Security surplus. McCrery said it would be his preference to include the accounts as part of a broader retirement package.

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis. -- who was reported in a recent column by Robert Novak to have told other conservatives that the Thomas measure would not include solvency measures that raise taxes or cut benefits -- said Tuesday he could not rule out that the solvency measures would be in the package.

Ryan noted that the bill has not been written yet.

But he would not comment directly on the Novak column, which he said described a private meeting.

Ryan spoke after participating in a separate event at which Republicans also promoted accounts that use the Social Security surplus.

Appearing at the event were Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., the lead sponsor of the Senate version of the bill, and Sen. John Sununu, R-N.H.

The two events appeared to be part of an effort to revive the issue as Congress moves toward its summer break. McCrery said lawmakers will be "talking about" their proposal during August.