

McCrery Holds Out Hope For Overhaul In 109th Congress

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House Ways and Means Social Security Subcommittee Chairman Jim McCrery, R-La., said Tuesday that prospects have faded for passing Social Security legislation this year.

But he voiced hope that "we'll get something done in this Congress," and disagreed with other Republicans who have said that Social Security will be off the table if the legislation is not completed this year.

Without giving details, he said that Ways and Means Chairman Thomas plans to unveil "soon" a retirement security package.

McCrery -- who has been consumed by the Hurricane Katrina-related needs of his western Louisiana district and its estimated 40,000 evacuees -- said that political conditions, including Katrina, have complicated the challenge of Social Security overhaul.

But the broader policy problem is "not getting any easier," he added. "It is very complex. But it's got to be done. ... My hope is that eventually we could somehow put aside the partisanship and get in the waters together" with Democrats.

McCrery added that he has spoken about the topic recently with Treasury Secretary Snow and presidential economic adviser Allan Hubbard, and that the Bush administration remains committed to the goal. He added that he has had "frank discussions" with President Bush and his top aides on how to achieve it.

In his two-hour appearance on a panel sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, McCrery reviewed the familiar demographic data that demonstrates the long-term unsustainability of Social Security benefits for the elderly.

"This Congress and future Congresses are faced with undeniable facts," he said. "A future Congress will have to make changes."

Also appearing on the panel was Rep. Earl Pomeroy, a North Dakota Democrat who also sits on the Ways and Means Committee, who discussed the growing challenges posed because people are living longer.

"The steam is very much out of privatizing Social Security in this Congress," Pomeroy said, while blaming current Republican proposals for failing to address either "solvency" or "security" problems with the program.

McCrery responded that Pomeroy's comments gave "some insight into the frustration that I have experienced. ... He says he's categorically opposed to private accounts. ... But he doesn't suggest changes."

Although McCrery added that he probably could make changes to address Pomeroy's concerns, the Democratic member did not immediately take up the offer. By Richard E. Cohen