

ROLL CALL

Hill GOP Follows Bush's Lead ; Lawmakers to Focus on Social Security Specifics

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Roll Call

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With President Bush's 60-day tour to build support for his Social Security plan wrapping up later this week, Republicans on and off Capitol Hill are preparing to shift their focus away from a broad educational campaign toward a more specific discussion of possible solutions.

For several weeks, House Republicans have been following the same track as Bush, holding district events, doing local media outreach and sending franked mail to convince the public that the Social Security system urgently needs fixing. But like the White House, Hill Republicans plan to pivot soon from the "awareness" campaign to a more substantive phase.

"Members are asking for more specifics," said House GOP Conference spokesman Greg Crist. "Members want to be able to frame solutions. The more they have, the more they'll be able to defend the president's positions."

But first they have to deal with the thousands of opponents of Bush's Social Security plan who will gather today in Upper Senate Park in a demonstration organized by the umbrella group Americans United to Protect Social Security.

In response, the GOP Conference will stage a roadblock-themed event to highlight Democrats' alleged intransigence on the Social Security issue, complete with yellow police tape and orange traffic cones that read "Democrat Obstruction Zone."

The program will feature four Republican members of the Ways and Means Committee: Reps. Bob Beauprez (Colo.), Sam Johnson (Texas), Paul Ryan (Wis.) and Clay Shaw (Fla.).

On Thursday, the Conference has tentatively planned another event featuring administration officials in anticipation of the end of the 60-day tour.

Also today, the Coalition for the Modernization and Protection of America's Social Security will launch its "Speak Up for Social Security Reform on Capitol Hill" effort.

The group plans to send dozens of activists to the Senate to lobby lawmakers and distribute information, with the goal of contacting all 100 Senate offices by the end of this week.

Like Congressional Republicans, CoMPASS will soon work to shift the Social Security debate into a new phase.

"I think that the dialogue has shifted from broad-based awareness to the need to talk about specific solutions," said CoMPASS spokeswoman Tita Freeman.

While the Senate's Social Security action will be focused on today's Finance Committee hearing, House Republicans are looking for ways to tie that issue into the broader theme of job creation and bipartisanship.

In recent weeks, the House GOP has hammered away at the idea that several of its recent legislative victories - including bills on bankruptcy, class action and permanent repeal of the estate tax - were accomplished with a significant number of Democratic votes.

Now Republicans hope to include Social Security in that litany, making the case that reform of the retirement program will strengthen the economy and that some Democrats will eventually come around to support the measure.

"We're wrapping that theme into our push to improve the economy," said Ron Bonjean, spokesman for Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.).