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BUSH BRINGS SOCIAL SECURITY CAMPAIGN TO OHIO

By Connie Mabin

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Unable to depend on solid support from some in his own party, President Bush brought his idea to overhaul Social Security straight to the people of Ohio yesterday.

Lawmakers will be forced to address the issue once citizens understand there will not be enough workers in the future to continue the same level of support for Social Security, Bush told a friendly crowd at Lakeland Community College, about 30 miles northeast of Cleveland.

"The math doesn't add up," Bush said.

The event was invitation-only, but Cleveland is the state's largest media market and Bush's message was covered statewide, giving the president an opportunity to sell his proposal to people who live in the critical swing state that gave him the electoral votes needed to win re-election.

"To get the pulse of this state is almost like getting the pulse of the nation," said Peter Schramm, director of the John M. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University.

The president and his supporters say workers could produce bigger retirement nest eggs by diverting a portion of payroll taxes to personal, or private, accounts.

However, before Bush spoke yesterday, White House spokesman Scott McClellan refused to rule out the possibility of Bush backing a plan to include the personal accounts as an add-on to the Social Security system, rather than financing them with Social Security taxes. "We're not going to get into ruling anything in or out," he said, as Bush traveled here.

Democrats and other opponents say diverting money to private accounts would weaken Social Security's traditional safety net.

About 200 people gathered in a grassy area near the gym where Bush spoke. Some were supporters who held "Fix Social Security" signs passed out by Republican organizers; others were protesters.

"President Bush's scheme for Social Security is so risky," said Jennifer Brady, 49, of Westlake. "The way I look at it, it's going to happen to us what happened to the Enron employees. It's just like putting all your eggs in one basket."

Amber Thorn, 22, a history and biology major at Mount Vernon Nazarene College near Columbus, made the 90-minute drive because she thinks the Social Security plan is needed, especially for her generation.

"Something needs to be done about it. I don't want to wait until it's too late for me or even too late for my children," she said.

Michael Murray, 19, said he is relieved Bush has started the discussion about changing Social Security.

"It makes me feel better personally," the Baldwin-Wallace College business student said. "The numbers don't lie. You need everyone to take it into their own hands."

Without public support, a congressional vote in favor of Bush's private accounts could be politically dangerous to members who must run again in two years, including Sen. Mike DeWine, a Cedarville Republican.

"There are a small number of issues that can impact the dynamics of a campaign, and members are loath to go against their constituencies' wishes on them for fear of retribution at election time," said Melanie Blumberg, an associate political-science professor at California University in Pennsylvania.

The Kirtland stop on Bush's 60-day, 60-city campaign-style tour to promote his plan was in a state home to several congressional Republicans who mostly have stayed out of the Social Security debate.

Kirtland is a Republican stronghold in Lake County, part of GOP Rep. Steven C. LaTourette's district. He hasn't taken a public position. DeWine and Republican Sen. George V. Voinovich have said they aren't sure personal-savings accounts are the best solution.

Republicans who support Bush's proposal include Reps. Michael G. Oxley, of Findlay, and John Boehner, of West Chester.

Yesterday's trip was Bush's third visit to Ohio since the November election and his 37th since taking office in January 2001.

Information from The Washington Post was included in this story.

