

House Rebuffs Senate FHIX Compromise

BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

Republican leaders in the Florida Senate offered up a revamped health care proposal Tuesday in an effort to end a budget stalemate that threatens to shut down state government, but the proposal was immediately rejected by Gov. Rick Scott and House GOP leaders.

Legislators are scheduled to return to the state Capitol next week for a 20-day special session where they are expected to pass a new state budget.

Senate President Andy Gardiner announced what he called a "compromise" on health care coverage that is an attempt to win over both skeptical House leaders as well as Scott.

The new Senate plan would jettison an initial proposal to expand Medicaid this summer, but instead would still rely on federal money linked to President Barack Obama's health care overhaul. Low-income Floridians would be eligible to purchase coverage through a new state-run exchange, but they would have to pay premiums and they would be required to work. The new health coverage plan would require federal approval and would not kick in until January.

It would also allow consumers who are currently getting insurance through the federal exchange to continue doing so instead being bumped to an expanded Medicaid program — something the House criticized in the initial proposal.

"We have listened to senators, House members, constituents, and other stakeholders and incorporated their feedback to create a stronger Florida solution, the Senate, House and Gov. Scott can proudly present to Washington as Florida's best offer for a health insurance exchange that meets the unique needs of our state," Gardiner said.

Scott said the proposal would cost the state \$5 billion over 10 years.

"A budget that keeps Florida's economy growing will cut taxes and give Floridians back more of the money they earn, not inevitably raise taxes in order to implement Obamacare and grow government," the governor said in a statement.

House leaders also criticized the new proposal. House Speaker Steve Crisafulli said he doubted Florida would win approval for some of the requirements and that the state would instead be left with a "costly and inefficient entitlement program."

Scott favored shifting the state's existing Medicaid population of 3 million into private health insurance and fought ardently a few years ago to get the federal government to sign off on it. He's altered his stance on Medicaid expansion multiple times and now opposes it.

The Obama administration is trying to entice states to expand Medicaid by offering to pay the entire bill and then 90 percent after that. It's a much more generous rate than the state's share for the current Medicaid population, which is a 60-40 split with the federal government. But the Republicans are reluctant to take any money tied to Obama's health care law.

The divide between the two chambers was sparked by the impending loss of more than \$1 billion in federal aid to hospitals that is set to expire this summer.

Federal officials told Florida that they wanted the state to consider expanding Medicaid insurance as part of the agreement to extend the hospital funds. Last week, the Obama administration offered to extend Florida's hospital funds for another two years, but only at about half the amount the state received last year, saying it would not approve hospital funding for costs that that would be covered by expansion.

Sen. Rene Garcia, a Hialeah Republican who chairs the Senate health care budget committee, said the Senate plan will help the state transition as it loses the federal money for hospitals. He called it a "much better investment of our limited taxpayer dollars."