



By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

As national debate rages over President Obama's health care proposals, Sen. Mike Johanns (R) found himself addressing this issue during a visit to the fair Tuesday, Aug. 11.

One of the big sticking points in the debate centers on whether the government should offer its own public alternative to private health care insurance.

Johanns said the cost of this type of program does not appear feasible.

In Nebraska alone, he said a recent study shows that of the 1.1 million with private health insurance, more than 700,000 would lose their private coverage.

He said more than 75,000 Nebraskans would still be without coverage, even under the proposed plan.

Johanns said he and his colleagues in the Senate all agree that health care in the country must be reformed.

Julie Chandler urged Johanns to go back to Washington, D.C. and set aside partisan politics to get something done.

Johanns said he hopes that when Congress reconvenes in September, that both the House and Senate can work together to "find middle ground that works."

He noted the American people have been speaking out during the current recess so it's time "to go back, sit down and get things figured out."

While he agrees that reform is a must, he does not believe that a government-funded public option is the answer.

This stance isn't just limited to the Republican party as a number of Democrats hold the same viewpoint.

Johanns said the only plan now out of committee would strip \$500 billion from Medicare and transfer it to the new health plan. Why not just fix Medicare, Johanns noted, instead of creating a new program.

What scares him is the bureaucracy in Washington that would be created to maintain a new program.

Another fear with the public option is that businesses would shift their cost of employee health coverage to the government plan, burgeoning the cost even more.

Johanns said that with a public option, a large corporation could save money by forcing employees onto the government plan instead of their own plans.

Johanns also fears rural hospitals could be at risk if Medicare and Medicaid funds are diverted to a new program.

Presently, a rural hospital can't survive on Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements alone. It's the payments from private health insurance that bridge the gap.

If that revenue diminishes or totally goes away under a public system, rural hospitals will undoubtedly be lost, Johanns said.

Pre-existing conditions

The discussion over pre-existing health conditions has received lots of attention during the recent debate.

Many feel that for reform to occur, insurance companies must no longer be able to refuse health coverage based on pre-existing conditions.

That's one thing that Chandler, an ardent Democrat, and Johanns do agree upon.

Chandler told Johanns she is personally affected by that issue, which makes it virtually impossible to get health insurance.

Johanns said the insurance companies are already at the table to discuss this issue. Chandler questioned why that hasn't happened before, crediting it to more partisan politics than pressure from the public.

Johanns remains hopeful that some resolution can be worked out next month.

Under an ideal situation, he said members of each party would come together, take out a blank piece of paper and determine what needs to be addressed and how to do it.

"I think we could come up with some outstanding efforts," the junior senator from Nebraska noted.

During his visit last week, he also met with area people to discuss issues surrounding cap-and-trade legislation.