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Petri fields questions on health care law

By Adam Tobias of the Daily Times staff

The topic of health care reform ruled the conversation Monday at a town hall meeting hosted by U.S. Rep. Tom Petri at the Watertown Senior and Community Center.

Petri spent about an hour fielding questions and listening to comments from the approximately 25 people in attendance. All of the audience members who spoke about the health care reform voiced their opposition to the bill that was recently signed into law by President Barack Obama.

Petri told the crowd there is a chance the health care reform bill could be repealed, but he made it clear it would be a lengthy process that could potentially take years.



U.S. Rep. Tom Petri is shown listening to questions from constituents during a town hall meeting held Monday at the Watertown Senior and Community Center. (ADAM TOBIAS/Daily Times)

"No law is permanent and every law passed is subject to being amended or repealed by Congress, but for that to happen you would have to have it passed - just as the first bill did - by the House and the Senate and be signed by the president," Petri said. "If the president did not sign it because he thought the law should stay on the books he could veto the repeal. Then you would have to pass it with a two-thirds vote.

"That would be, in the short run, very hard because you only elect one-third of the senators every two years, so it would probably take about four years and then the president would be up too," he added. "One thing you could do immediately after the next election if you were to change the majorities is to stop funding for all or part of the legislation."

Petri said one of the things people can do to help get the bill repealed is to vote against all of the members of Congress who backed the health care reform when they are up for election.

"Obviously when you have a contest or an election you ask people what their position is on different things and if you disagree with them then you try to find someone who would represent you," Petri said.

When asked about how the bill will affect those who already have private health insurance, Petri said the people in this group should not expect to see any major changes until 2014. After that date, however, Petri says it is too difficult to tell exactly how things will take shape.

"I think certainly for the next three years until 2014, there should be no change," Petri said. "You may be grandfathered in, but, of course, insurance companies are constantly making changes in policies because of the differences they are experiencing in costs or whatever, so once this new system is set up - if it actually goes into effect - they will have to get approval for the policies that they are offering and they will have to meet those standards.

"So, if you already have a policy, you may not be affected for a couple of years after that, but you really can't tell at this point," he added. "The one thing we can say is it's unlikely that there will be any real change because of this law for people who already have policies until 2014. Now one other thing about that though, insurance companies are going to be required to cover people with pre-existing conditions and family members under 26, so obviously if they have to have more people covered who are making claims, they will probably have to raise the rates at some point for people who already have policies because at the end of the day, as we all know, despite all the speeches in the world there is no free lunch."

According to Petri, the health care reform bill will also result in additional expenses for younger people.

"One of the reasons younger people don't buy health insurance is because they feel they are healthy and if something does go wrong, they don't often have assets so they figure they will be taken care of out of the emergency room or through some other process," Petri said.

"Now they will be required to buy insurance or pay a fine and it is my belief that under the law that was passed, the rates cannot vary more than 3 to 1, as opposed to where the market would indicate where they would be: only a tenth as much for young people as for older people," he added. "So, younger people will be paying a little more to help take care of the costs of other people in the community."

Ella Behling, co-owner of DEB Wholesale Inc. in Watertown, said she is concerned about a provision in the bill that would require small businesses with more than 50 employees to either offer health care coverage or pay an annual penalty for each full-time worker.

"I offer health insurance," Behling said. "We have benefits. We have vacation and I always have. It may be cheaper for me to just pay the fine.

"The government is not helping me, they are hurting me," she added. "I'm at the point where I'm having a hard time trying to keep up with trying to understand what's required and what's mandated. It's to the point of where I am going, 'Why do I want to be in business? Why do I want to give jobs?' I'm told I'm being the devil because I am not hiring."

Watertown resident Patricia Frank read a few provisions in the bill that dealt with end of life programs, which she compared to assisted suicide.

"What I want to know is what man in our government wrote something like this," Frank said, referring to the end of life provisions. "Only God can decide how and when anyone will die, whether they are a criminal or disabled. This is totally against God's will. Our forefathers came here for religious and political reasons. How can the government do this to us? It's just a sin."

Juli Logemann, of the town of Watertown, said she thinks it is vital to make medical education less expensive to help increase the number of doctors and nurses in the country.

"We have a shortage of doctors, we have a shortage of nurses and we have nurses coming in from foreign countries," Logemann said. "We should be educating our own people and it shouldn't be so expensive. I know people who are in medical school now who won't go back another year because they don't want to put another \$100,000 on their student loans."

Logemann also said there is currently a shortage of family practitioners due to the desire of some involved in medical education to make more money by pursuing specialty fields.

"I think the whole system is turned upside down, including the outsourcing of X-rays and all this stuff that goes on," she added. "Yes, we save money, but do we get the care we need? I question that."

Other topics discussed at Monday's town hall meeting included the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, cap and trade, illegal immigration, employment discrimination, the U.S. census and the national deficit.

Petri holds town hall meetings in his district throughout the year to give his constituents a chance to discuss federal issues, ask questions and provide comments in a group setting.