



Posted on Thu, Mar. 18, 2010

Costello still opposes health care bill

BY MIKE FITZGERALD
News-Democrat

U.S. Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, was still on record as of Thursday that he will vote no on the Senate version of the health care reform bill the House is set to vote on this weekend.

But observers familiar with Costello and congressional deal-making said his opposition likely stems from an effort to wring concessions from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and President Barack Obama.

These observers expressed confidence that Costello will ultimately vote yes on a measure that has become the No. 1 issue for his party's top leaders.

"He's definitely holding out for the best possible deal," said Teri Newman, Costello's GOP rival in the race for the 12th Congressional District seat in November.

One of Costello's top legislative priorities is to win passage of a bill he sponsored last summer. Deemed critical to the metro-east economy, it would delay the implementation of federal flood hazard zone maps for at least five years.

So far Costello's proposal has stalled in the House, reportedly because of opposition from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the White House.

Published reports indicate that Pelosi is still at least five votes shy of the 216 she needs to pass the Senate version of the bill. Nonetheless, Pelosi has scheduled a floor vote for Sunday morning.

Meanwhile, Costello is still leaning against the health care bill while "reviewing the bill changes and will have a statement after the vote, which should be Sunday," Costello spokesman David Gillies wrote in an e-mail to the News-Democrat.

Isaac Wood, who writes about the House for an online political journal, noted that Costello -- as a deeply entrenched incumbent with a huge campaign war chest -- has little to fear from a political newcomer such as Newman, regardless of how he votes on the health care bill.

But Costello could suffer serious career damage if he bucks Democratic leaders and votes no on the health care measure, Wood said.

If Costello, an 11-term congressman, has any aspirations of assuming the chairmanship of a powerful House committee, then Costello has every incentive to vote yes, according to Wood, the House race editor for Sabato's Crystal Ball (www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball).

"You have to go along to get along if you want to move up in the leadership," Wood said.

If he votes no, he risks stirring up Pelosi's wrath, which would be "against his interest in every possible way," Wood said.

Costello last weekend told reporters that he planned to vote no on the Senate bill out of concern it would force taxpayers to pay for elective abortions.

Newman noted that Costello had already voted in favor of the House version of the measure last November.

Newman said she found it extremely hard to believe that Costello would break ranks with labor unions -- who strongly favor the bill and are the backbone of Costello's base -- and vote no as a matter of conscience.

"He's going to do what's good for Jerry," she said.

As of Thursday, Obama and Pelosi were hunting down the last few votes needed to win passage with a 216-vote majority.

"If Jerry can position himself to be the last vote, then he definitely is in the cat bird seat," Newman said.

If passed into law, the Senate health care bill would require adult Americans to obtain some type of health care insurance. It would also prohibit insurance companies from denying coverage to people for pre-existing medical conditions.

The reform bill would cost \$940 billion over 10 years, but will cut costs and raise new revenues, leading to a cut in the federal deficit of nearly \$140 billion, the Congressional Budget Office reported Thursday.

In its second 10-year period, the health care reform would cut the federal deficit by \$1.2 trillion, the office concluded.

Kent Redfield, an expert on Illinois politics, said the only explanations for Costello's threat to vote no on the bill are either he is bargaining for something or he wants to be shown some respect.

"If people feel they are being ignored and taken for granted, then they like to be asked," said Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Redfield acknowledged the health care bill -- especially its short-term costs and massive scope -- could pose a downside for Democrats in the upcoming November elections even if they passed it.

But after betting so much political capital on the measure, he said "there'll be a bigger downside for not passing health care."
Contact reporter Mike Fitzgerald at mfitzgerald@bnd.com or 239-2533.

© 2007 Belleville News-Democrat and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.belleville.com>