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\$940 billion health care reform nears vote

Dems get Schauer's support, hope to push bill through House on Sunday

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Washington -- The yearlong battle over sweeping changes to the nation's health care system heads to a climactic vote in the House this weekend after Democrats unveiled a \$940 billion plan Thursday.

Democrats plowed fresh billions into insurance subsidies for consumers and added a \$250 rebate for seniors facing high prescription drugs costs as they worked to get the 216 votes needed to pass the bill.

One vote they picked up was that of Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek.

"In the past few weeks, four different special interest groups have spent nearly \$300,000 on attack ads in my district to scare voters and kill health care reform," he said. "Passing health care reform will ultimately help get our economy back on track."

The state's other freshman congressman, Rep. Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township, held back his decision, saying he needs time to read the final version.

If Democrats succeed in getting the bill passed in the House, the Senate could take the measure up early next week, where it will need a simple majority to pass after a controversial procedural step by Democrats to avoid the usual 60 votes needed for contested measures.

In a hint of how central the health care vote will be in the upcoming high-stakes November elections, Schauer was quickly hammered by one of his Republican opponents -- Tim Walberg, the freshman congressman Schauer ousted in 2008 -- and the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"By going against the will of the American people and supporting a health care bill they do not want, Mark Schauer has just sealed his fate as a one-term member of Congress," committee spokesman Tom Erickson said.

Pressure was even being felt by lawmakers who have said they're against the bill.

Catholics United announced a TV ad campaign in Michigan pressuring Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, who says unless he gets stricter abortion restrictions added he'll vote against the bill.

The TV ad says Stupak's contention the bill would permit federal funds for abortions is "not true."

Meanwhile, Dave Maluchnik, spokesman for the Michigan Catholic Conference, said his group sent an e-mail to 1,000 members urging them to contact Michigan lawmakers to urge them to oppose the health care bill "unless and until" it includes abortion wording it favors.

Anti-abortion Catholics supporting the bill organized a teleconference call with Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Flint, and he reiterated his belief the final bill will not allow federal money to be used for abortions. Kildee announced

on Wednesday that he would support the bill.

Pointing out he will be 81 years old in September and studied six years in the seminary, he said: "Certainly at this stage in my life, I am not going to change my mind and support abortion. I am not going to jeopardize my eternal salvation."

Rep. Vern Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids, said he'll vote against the bill, as will the state's other Republicans.

"It's a mess," Ehlers said.

Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, D-Detroit, said she's "90 percent yes."

Schauer said he was not offered anything by the White House or Democratic leaders in return for his support of the final bill.

President Barack Obama scuttled a trip to Asia in favor of last-minute lobbying at the White House on his signature issue, playing host to a procession of wavering Democrats.

"It will make history and we will make progress by passing this legislation," predicted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as Democrats unveiled final alterations to the bill meant to expand health care to 32 million uninsured, bar the insurance industry from denying coverage on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions, and trim federal deficits by an estimated \$138 billion over the next decade.

The bill would affect nearly every American and remake one-sixth of the national economy.

As Democrats trumpeted their bill, particularly its potential impact on the deficit, Republicans attacked it relentlessly as a government takeover of the health care industry financed by ever higher Medicare cuts and tax increases.

"The American people are saying, 'Stop' and they're screaming at the top of their lungs," said House GOP Leader John Boehner of Ohio.

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