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April 5 (Bloomberg) -- U.S. Senator Max Baucus, the senior Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, said President George W. Bush's proposal to create private Social Security accounts has no chance of passing Congress.

"'Privatization is dead,'" Baucus, a Montana lawmaker, said on Capitol Hill today. The Bush proposal "'won't pass, no way, no how.'"

Lawmakers returned to Washington today after a two-week recess. Bush, who has undertaken a 60-day tour of the country to promote his proposal, and his congressional allies had hoped to use the recess to generate momentum for diverting Social Security funds to create the accounts.

Almost all Democrats, including Baucus, oppose the accounts, and polls indicate the proposal is losing favor with the public. Republicans must get the support of at least five Democratic senators to gather the 60 votes necessary to pass Social Security legislation. Baucus said he contacted Andrew Card, Bush's chief of staff, several weeks ago to tell him Bush would not receive the necessary Democratic backing.

Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, the No. 3 Senate Republican, said Republican leaders won't move Social Security legislation until they win support of at least one Democrat on the finance panel, which will consider the bill.

"'It's going to be very hard to get it out of the Senate Finance Committee without bipartisan support,'" said Santorum, who chairs the finance panel's subcommittee on Social Security.

Senator Charles Grassley, an Iowa Republican and the Finance Committee chairman, said he wasn't sure Congress would pass a bill.

'If,' not 'When'

In response to a request for a timeline on legislation, Grassley said at a Washington tax conference: "'Your question to me is 'when.' I think it's more of a question of 'if.'"



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Republican supporters of the Bush proposal dismissed any suggestions it's in trouble. ``There's no question the president has made very significant progress," said Senator John Sununu of New Hampshire. Sununu said he would introduce a bill next week to create the accounts.

Bush has raised the awareness of fiscal problems faced by Social Security, which will begin to pay out more benefits than it receives by 2017, said Karl Rove, Bush's deputy chief of staff. ``The public and Congress are becoming aware that it's a serious problem," Rove, Bush's chief political and policy adviser, said in an interview yesterday.

White House Persistence

Bush isn't willing to abandon personal accounts, Rove said. ``The personal retirement account has to be part of the long-term solution," he said.

In Washington, Democratic lawmakers told reporters that constituents expressed increasingly negative views of Bush's initiative. ``I saw little, if any, support for radical restructuring of Social Security," Senator Tim Johnson of South Dakota said.

Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said Bush must abandon the private accounts idea if he wants Democratic support for restructuring Social Security. He said private accounts do nothing to guarantee the solvency of the program.

``Until he does that, we are going to be right where we are - - protecting Social Security," said Reid.

Bush traveled today to pitch his plan in West Virginia, the 20th state he has visited since outlining his proposal in his Feb. 2 State of the Union speech.

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