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Hill Takes a Back Seat on Social Security

Administration, Republican National Committee Lead Drive to Add Private Accounts

By *Mike Allen and Peter Baker*

Washington Post Staff Writers

Wednesday, April 6, 2005; Page A04

The e-mail to her constituents had billed the gathering as a "town hall meeting on Social Security," but the purported host -- Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) -- was sitting by herself in the fourth row of a darkened theater of a prep school in Charlotte.

Standing in the cone of a spotlight over the podium last week was a White House official who had flown in just for the evening. It was Keith Hennessey, deputy director of the National Economic Council, who was using colorful graphs and bullet points to make the case that President Bush's plan to add individual accounts to Social Security would not hurt current retirees.

When Myrick got her precious 30 seconds on the 11 o'clock news that night, she was much more vague. She simply said that Congress is anxious to take on the problem and that she would take ideas back to Washington.

Stung by a spate of rowdy, critic-packed town hall meetings about Social Security over the Presidents' Day break in February, Republicans shied away from such open forums during the two-week Easter recess. Instead, they stuck mainly to workshops in which administration officials did most of the talking and lawmakers stepped up to answer a few questions after lengthy presentations from Bush appointees.

The lawmakers' reluctance to take center stage is emblematic of the back seat that members of Congress have chosen to take in the debate over Social Security. With the year one-fourth over, lawmakers have so far served largely as bystanders in a campaign for a retirement-system restructuring that is being driven by the White House, the Treasury Department and the Republican National Committee -- along with business allies that have spent more than \$10 million on the effort.

The administration used great fanfare to announce a "60 Stops in 60 Days" tour at the beginning of March. Bush's aides far exceeded that target, holding 108 events in the first 30 days, which ended Friday. Of those, 52 were town hall meetings with members of Congress such as Myrick. The guest hosts have included Vice President Cheney, Treasury Secretary John W. Snow and Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez. Treasury Department spokesman Rob Nichols even flew to Bellevue, Wash., to give a speech for freshman Rep. David G. Reichert (R-Wash.).

Progress for America, a private group that is allied with the White House and has spent about \$9 million on the campaign, is sponsoring traffic reports in 25 cities so that commuters will continually hear its messages. "There's a crisis in Social Security -- and it's coming sooner than you think," says one script.

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"Now is the time for people in Congress to . . . come to the table with how they think [Social Security] ought to be fixed," President Bush said. (Jason Reed -- Reuters)

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Nevertheless, polls do not show momentum, Democrats remain united against key elements of Bush's plan, and Republicans have yet to unite around a specific solution.

Bush, speaking in West Virginia yesterday, appeared to be growing irked that Capitol Hill has not responded to his calls to sit down and negotiate a Social Security package. "Now is the time for people in Congress to stop playing politics with the issue and come to the table with how they think it ought to be fixed," he said.

For the day, Bush abandoned his usual format of rehearsed panel discussions and spoke at a podium at West Virginia University at Parkersburg. He also visited the nearby Bureau of Public Debt to make the symbolic point that Social Security is not a trust fund with money set aside for recipients, but a pay-as-you-go system facing huge shortfalls in the future.

GOP lawmakers contend they are making progress but acknowledge that it is slow. "My view now is that if we don't happen to get this done in 2005 . . . this will be a political issue in 2006 -- talking about the problem," said House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), who will be responsible for lining up votes for a Social Security bill. "We're learning to talk about this; the president's driving the issue. I think we're a long way from out on this particular deal."

Former House speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) pronounced the effort so far a failure and said the message has been "too complex and Washington-centered." He said Bush and the Hill need to start over with "a narrowly focused, very directed, very specific campaign" aimed at people under 40.

"I recommend they take a deep breath, step back, launch a new campaign in which the urgency is the fact that every day that you fail to pass it, every young person in America loses the interest for the rest of their lifetime on that day's savings," Gingrich said. "It's going to take them at least a year to dig out of this and get to a point where they have something that's passable."

Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) said he knows of no defections from the Democrats' united stand against Bush's plan to divert payroll taxes from Social Security. He said that, although his members are free agents, they have concluded that "the best thing to do for the caucus, them individually and the country is just to hang together." He said Democrats are willing to work with Republicans on some type of individual account that would be added to Social Security, but he noted that the Senate is "running out of time to do much" this year.

Despite signs that the Social-Security train is stalled, the campaign by the administration and its private-sector allies is escalating, and liberals and Democrats are matching or even surpassing it. Two labor-backed groups created to fight Bush's plan announced this week that they plan to raise as much as \$35 million for television advertising and grass-roots organizing, on top of the more than \$15 million that has been spent by AARP on print, television and radio advertising since Jan. 4.

Today, the Treasury Department is holding "Social Security Radio Day" at its headquarters from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., with Cabinet members and other presidential appointees lining up to chat with talk-show hosts such as West Virginia's Hoppy Kercheval and Seattle's Kirby Wilbur.

Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman started a contest -- "National March Madness: Preserve Social Security Champion," complete with a spinning basketball on the Web -- to encourage college students to collect signatures for the party's Social Security petition.

Lawmakers said they plan to step up their activities. The two parties held a formal debate in the Senate last night, the Senate Finance Committee plans hearings in the coming weeks, and House Republicans are meeting today to pare down their Social Security message points.

Baker reported from West Virginia.

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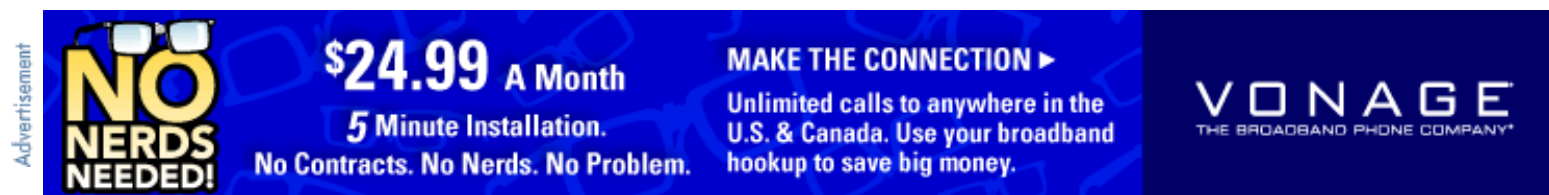
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