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GOP Boards Up the 'Town Hall'

by **Andrea Stone**

Republicans in Congress have a game plan to avoid "March madness" when they go home this weekend to talk to constituents about Social Security during a two-week holiday recess.

Shaken by raucous protests at open "town hall"-style meetings last month, House Republican Conference Chairwoman Deborah Pryce of Ohio and other GOP leaders are urging lawmakers to hold lower-profile events this time.

Republicans plan to heed President Bush's call Wednesday "to talk to their constituents not only about the problem, but about solutions" to Social Security's looming financial shortfall. The president wants to allow workers to divert some payroll taxes into private investment accounts.

A USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll conducted late last month found that only 35% approve of Bush's handling of the issue. Yet the importance of debate on the matter was reinforced by a separate Gallup Poll on Wednesday, in which nearly one in four adults said Social Security will be the most important problem facing the nation in 25 years. That's more than double the number who said so a year ago.

This month, Republican leaders say they are chucking the open town-hall format. They plan to visit newspaper editorial boards and talk to constituents at Rotary Club lunches, senior citizen centers, chambers of commerce meetings and local businesses. In those settings, "there isn't an opportunity for it to disintegrate into something that's less desirable," says Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, chairman of the Senate Republican Conference.

Republican leaders are urging their party's lawmakers to take the spotlight off themselves by convening panels of experts from the Social Security Administration, conservative think tanks, local colleges and like-minded interest groups to answer questions about the federal retirement program.

The shift in venues and formats, Santorum says, is aimed at producing "more of an erudite discussion" about Social Security's problems and possible solutions.

Santorum was among dozens of members of Congress who ran gantlets of demonstrators and shouted over hecklers at Social Security events last month. Many who showed up to protest were alerted by e-mails and bused in by anti-Bush organizations such as MoveOn.org and USAction, a liberal advocacy group. They came with prepared questions and instructions on how to confront lawmakers.

MoveOn, which campaigned against Bush's re-election and is now focused on defeating his Social Security proposals, has issued a guide for activists. It includes such tips as: "Ask pointed questions that put the representative or senator on record on important issues like benefit cuts, raising the retirement age and new debt necessary to pay for privatization." It also includes a section on "How to talk to a conservative about Social Security (if you must)." The group says it sent activists to 28 meetings.

Pryce says of such efforts: "It's 'Rabble Rousing 101.'" She contends that the groups gave their followers "everything but eggs to throw at us."

Pryce says many Republicans "came back amazed at the depths that the opposition is going to and a little wiser about how to promote our issues." She says opposition tactics scared away constituents with "legitimate concerns," and Republicans now want to "put a little more control back into it."

But many other Republican lawmakers didn't hold Social Security events last month. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas says he was "disappointed" by how few Republicans held town halls during the Presidents Day recess: 95 out of 232.

Minnesota Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum says of her Republican colleagues, "They either don't support (the president's plan) or they can't defend it." McCollum plans to speak in the neighboring districts of Republicans Mark Kennedy and John Kline, neither of whom held Social Security town halls last month.

Pryce said Wednesday that 50 to 80 House Republicans planned Social Security events this month, including Kline. Her spokesman, Greg Crist, said that the number is even higher and that Republican members "are on track to best" their February total. But details are sketchy.

"There are some people who are probably shying away" from holding meetings, says Rep. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, who offered advice on how to avoid disruptions to her fellow Republicans at a House caucus meeting last week. Capito, a veteran of town-hall meetings in other years that she has "not been able to control," reported that two recent district meetings went off without a hitch.

"You don't call on (protesters) when you see them in the audience, because you know who your constituents are," says Capito, who doesn't plan any public events on Social Security this month.

Pryce denies that her party's members would limit participants or audiences to supporters, as the Bush administration has done during its current 60-day Social Security



tour.

But Crist says most panels will include like-minded participants, as they did when lawmakers held similar events during the debate in 2003 over a Medicare prescription-drug benefit. Back then, AARP officials who supported the Medicare plan took part in Republican forums. This time, the 35-million-member seniors group is opposed to Bush's plan and will not be invited to take part in Republicans' events.

Republicans "like staging events in front of strictly partisan audiences," says Tom Matzzie, MoveOn's Washington director. "They're trying to create political theater in the place of political discussion and debate."

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