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Barbara Bush Aids in Social Security Fight

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By DEB RIECHMANN

PENSACOLA, Fla. (AP) - President Bush, needing more converts to his plan for Social Security reform, brought his mom to help with the sales pitch Friday.

Wearing her trademark pearls, Barbara Bush took the stage with the president and another of her sons, Gov. Jeb Bush. George W. Bush opened the program by reassuring people born before 1950 that their Social Security benefits would not change.



(AP) President Bush, left, spends a moment with his brother and Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, prior to the...

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On cue, the 79-year-old former first lady joked that she showed up so she could tell her two sons what to do.

"That's really not why I'm here," she quickly admitted. "I'm here because your father (President George H.W. Bush) and I have 17 grandchildren, all born after 1950. And we want to know, is someone going to do something about it (Social Security). That's the whole reason - other than seeing my boys."

Bush contends he's making progress on the Social Security issue, but polls show growing opposition to his idea to overhaul the system by allowing younger workers to put some of their payroll taxes into private retirement accounts.

With or without private accounts, future retirees are expected to get smaller Social Security benefits than promised. The president argues that investment returns generated by the private accounts

would offset the decrease. Some opponents say Bush's plan is too risky because the value of the accounts could go both up and down with the stock market.

"A mix of conservative bonds and stocks will get you a better rate of return on your money than that which you're going to get inside the government," Bush said.

Reassuring his audience at Pensacola Junior College that he wasn't proposing to dismantle the system, Bush said younger workers will continue to get Social Security checks when they retire.

"I just can't guarantee how big it's going be," he said. "There's not enough money to pay the promises - I'll just tell you that.

"We're not going to be able to keep the promises unless we're willing to have extraordinarily high taxes on the people coming up, or significant benefit cuts."

He promoted private accounts again later at the Lake Nona YMCA Family Center in Orlando, where he explained how American financial matters have changed over the years.

"I was telling Mother in the limousine - I don't remember talking to her about 401(k)s when I was a little guy," Bush said. "I don't remember IRAs, defined contribution plans. This world has changed since I was raised.

There's a lot of young kids who now understand what it means to invest, they're comfortable with watching their money grow."

This was Bush's second visit to Florida in just over a month. In all, Bush has stopped in 14 states since launching his Social Security drive in his State of the Union speech.

But Mrs. Bush was a new face on his road tour and their interplay spiced up the discussion about Social Security, oft full of numbers and projections that can make eyes glaze over.

Bush, who routinely tells audiences that he listens to his mother, joked about how people say he's got his father's eyes and his mother's tart tongue.

"If you would listen, I'd tell you more," she said.

In Orlando, mother and son also stopped at the Life Project Senior Development Center where seniors, seated at round tables, had just finished lunch. Fully aware of her role as Social Security



(AP) President Bush walks from the residence, Friday, March 18, 2005, as he departs the White House for...

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saleswoman, Mrs. Bush moved throughout the room, greeting the seniors individually, shaking hands and signing autographs.

"I worked the whole room!" she exclaimed.

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