



But now many GOP lawmakers appear wary of forging ahead with a politically risky plan until Bush can demonstrate there is adequate public support for change to the 70-year-old federal retirement program.

Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.) said that at a meeting he conducted, "People [were] saying, 'Hey, wait a minute. Let's deal with this Medicare-Medicaid situation first. That's where my greatest pain is.' "

Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) said he supports the president's efforts, but added, "It's going to be a difficult thing to do at best."

Frist supports the president's proposal for creating personal investment accounts but acknowledged to reporters that the plan is in trouble. "I wouldn't take that off the table yet," Frist said.

In another sign of the difficulty in selling the package Bush has outlined, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) said in a radio interview that he thinks workers should be able to divert only about half as much in payroll taxes to new personal investment accounts as the White House has suggested. Under Bush's proposal, workers younger than 55 who opt to participate in the program would be able to divert as much as 4 percent of income subject to Social Security taxation into individual investment accounts, beginning in 2009.

Grassley said on "The Diane Rehm Show" on WAMU-FM that under a restructured Social Security, young people are "going to be able to take maybe 2 percent, in my estimation . . . and start saving for retirement."

Bush and the Republican leadership have yet to agree on the specifics of remaking Social Security, but a detailed bill will be introduced Monday by Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), a maverick in his party who may run for president in 2008. Hagel has been developing a comprehensive plan largely in secret that includes the centerpiece of Bush's idea -- personal accounts that come from payroll taxes. Hagel's bill also addresses the future solvency of the system.

House leaders have said they want the Senate to go first in passing Social Security legislation. That is because they are pessimistic about picking up Democratic support, and they do not want to put GOP members in the position of passing a controversial bill that then dies in the Senate, leaving a ripe issue for Democrats in 2006.

Some White House officials and congressional Republican leaders have said if they do not win passage of a bill this year, it would be more difficult to do so in the heated political environment of an election year, or in the two years after that when Bush is a lame duck and attention is focused on a new presidential race.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), meeting reporters in his office, called Social Security "the mother of all issues, and it is going to take a lot of dialogue with the American people."

"I have been a little disappointed that about a third of our members, a little over a third of our members, have held town meetings," DeLay said. "As the majority leader, I would love to have 232 members holding multiple town meetings throughout their districts. Hopefully, we will get there."

"Once you get the facts out and get through all the misleading comments by the opposition, then people realize that there is a problem," DeLay said.

Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) told reporters that the past week of public forums "has proven that the president's message is not selling."

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