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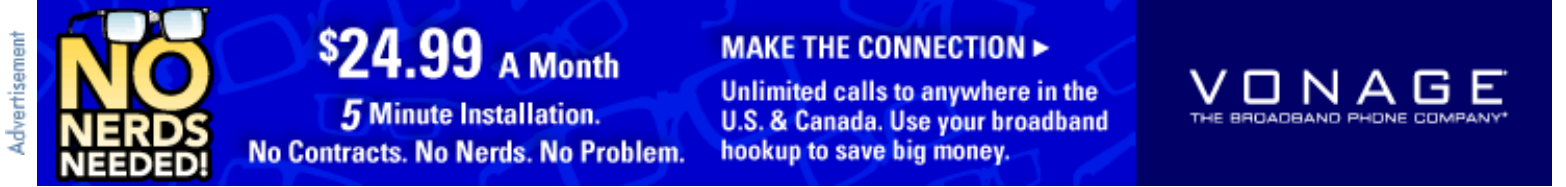
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Young Slowly Entering Social Security Fray

By *GLEN JOHNSON*

The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON -- Despite their sizable stake in the outcome, America's young people largely have been absent from the debate about the future of Social Security. That is beginning to change as Congress gets more involved in legislation to overhaul the federal retirement program.

Student presidents from 150 colleges in all 50 states have written lawmakers urging a plan that strengthens the Depression-era program while avoiding adding to the budget deficit.

At the same time, a student group opposed to the plan proposed by President Bush has taken an active role on 43 campuses, much like a rival group that supports the White House's approach.

The House Ways and Means Committee has scheduled two hearings on Social Security this week. The Senate Finance Committee has one of its own. Both committees are aiming to produce a bill this summer. The White House hopes Bush can sign a bill into law this fall, before the campaign season opens for the 2006 midterm congressional elections.

"I'm surprised younger people haven't been more vocal because they have the most to gain or lose through this process," said investment executive Robert Pozen. His plan to change how future benefits are calculated has won praise from the White House.

So far, much of the debate has focused on how to prepare Social Security for the impending retirement of the baby boom generation.

The president has ruled out benefit changes for workers age 55 and older. Bush has endorsed a change in the formula for calculating future benefit growth for middle- and upper-income workers.

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He also is pushing to have workers younger than 55 divert up to two-thirds of their Social Security payroll tax into investment accounts that would offset reductions in the standard benefit check.

The people potentially most affected by the changes are those just now entering the work force. Many of those people have doubts about whether Social Security will be solvent in the future.

Polls suggest three-fourths of people between 18 and 29 feel that Social Security in its present form is going to run out of money at some point. Most adults under 50 were likely to feel this way, according to an AP-Ipsos poll in early May.

Those older than 50 had doubts about the financial future of the system, but their level of concern was lower than that of younger adults.

"I haven't really seen any student activism," said Elise Elzinga, who graduated over the weekend from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., where Bush was the commencement speaker Saturday. "It's hard when it's something out so far in the future for them to grasp."

Elzinga has been an exception, writing in an opinion-editorial in the Detroit Free Press last week, "I believe that the president's Social Security campaign not only exaggerates the severity of the Social Security budget problem, it would also dangerously cut benefits that many Americans depend on."

She also has joined Students United to Protect Social Security, an offshoot of Americans United to Protect Social Security, an opposition group underwritten by labor unions. Groups such as Rock the Vote and the NAACP Youth and College Division have worked with Students United to organize campus activity.

"Young people need to be aware of what the president is trying to do, because we are going to inherit the results of the decisions being made today," said Democratic Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida, a 38-year-old House freshman.

Meanwhile, Students For a Secure Future has risen from the ranks of student presidents. They signed a letter last week highlighting Social Security's financial problems, but are split on the president's proposals.

"We believe the best approach is to examine the levels at which workers pay into the system, ensure that benefits remain at current levels for the neediest recipients, and reassess the payout to others," the letter said, giving a nod to the "progressive indexing" favored by Bush.

At the same time, the student leaders wrote: "We do not support plans that divert funds away from Social Security that cut benefits for people who need them or result in deficits."

Bush is receiving unqualified support for his plan from the College Republican National Committee, as well as a new group called Students for Saving Social Security. He also is reaching out actively to younger workers each time he speaks about the issue, as he did last week in Milwaukee.

"Certainly the White House acknowledges that it's difficult to get younger people to focus on the long term," said White House spokesman Trent Duffy. "Most young people aren't focused on retirement when they get out of college."

"At the same time," Duffy said, "we feel younger people are the strongest supporters of the president's personal accounts because they are familiar with 401(k)s and investing in the stock market, and because many of them don't believe it will be there for them in the future otherwise."

On the Net:

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