

TOBACCO TAX WON'T WORK, HE SAYS

Rose: No Health Care Reform Package This Year

BY SUSAN USHER

Don't expect enactment of a health care reform plan this year, U.S. Rep. Charles G. (Charlie) Rose told an audience of between 80 and 100 health care providers, farmers and other small business owners, and consumers interested in reform proposals now before Congress.

Rose, who confirmed that he is officially seeking the Speaker of the House of Representatives post, said he couldn't vote for any existing health care bills in their present form.

One of the big concerns: how to create a plan, and a funding mechanism, that all affected parties can live with. Achieving that goal is complicated by it being an election year and by there being no unified front that expresses the desires of consumers, he said.

Rather than adopt a reform measure simply to have reform, Rose said he prefers a slower process that takes into account the concerns expressed by various interests while addressing the two key problems with health care today: access and affordability.

For example, the home health care industry opposes 20-percent co-payments for home health care visits, saying their patients can't pay that.

Rose suggested the plan Congress adopts shouldn't include an increase in the tobacco tax or an additional burden on employees, Rose said. To reduce the costs of additional tests required by doctors to back their professional judgments, he supports a simultaneous change in tort laws to reduce the liability claims juries can award in medical cases.

The health care reform proposal backed by President Bill Clinton relies on an increase in the tobacco tax, which Rose predicted would not do the job after the first year, when the "goose" would be killed because people would give up smoking before paying the higher cost of tobacco products.



SPEAKING FRIDAY at a health care forum at The Brunswick Hospital, Dr. John J. Caulfield, an oral surgeon, suggests plugging gaps in coverage to improve the existing health care system rather than inventing a new plan that might not work as well.

Rose also noted that the health care industry is making changes in response to concerns about rising health care costs. Last year, for example, the cost of health care rose only 2½ percent, where in recent years it has exceeded the Consumer Price Index by 10 percent to 12 percent.

It was Rose's second visit here to discuss health care. Several months ago he attended a smaller gathering held at the office of Dr. Charles Locke, who also introduced him Friday night.

"I was very pleased to hear his lack of urgency, in the sense that he felt it was important to do the right legislation—something we can all live with—rather than hurrying to get a bill passed," said Mark Gregson, chief executive officer of The Brunswick Hospital, which

hosted the health care issues forum.

Gregson noted one study that suggested several changes in the current health care system would "take care of health care needs of 91 percent of the people" and 97 percent of the dollars spent for health care. That plan, unlike some others, would include no mandatory provision rules for businesses and no increased taxes.

Those changes: subsidizing health care insurance premiums for households receiving up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level—the so-called working poor; and providing a tax deduction for health care insurance premiums.

"Things can be done," said Gregson. "I firmly believe we have the best health care system in the world." He said there are steps that can be taken to increase its effective-

ness. Those don't include the broad federal role in health care proposed in some plans, which he believes would only result in a larger bureaucracy and poorer care.

Managed care is one example of a change that benefits providers and consumers, he suggested, offering a means of helping people stay healthy and meeting consumers' needs while keeping costs down by utilizing services at the minimum level necessary.

"I'm glad to see that Charlie Rose has an understanding of that and that the message is making some progress through the halls of Washington."

Joe Stanley is president of the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce, partner with his brother Maliston in an auto repair and used car sales business, and a

member of board of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center. As a small businessman he has concerns about health care reform, particularly mandates that require employers to provide a certain level of

insurance coverage for workers. Those proposals "might not bankrupt some of us," he said in an interview Monday, but could result in lost jobs as some employers choose to cut their work force rather than go out of business.

"Unless the rich are willing to pay more and the poor are willing to pay some, we'll never have true health care reform," he suggested.

"It's costing small businesses already because we haven't done that," he suggested, referring to increasing cost of coverage. "It's a real complex problem and there are no easy answers."

Stanley shared much of that same message at a Jan. 20 health care forum held at N.C. State University in Raleigh, serving as a panelist at the request of the sponsor, 4th District U.S. Rep. David Price.

Mandatory coverage at the proposed program costs would simply add to the "burden" already levied on small business owners through government programs such as Workman's Compensation, Social Security withholding and unemployment benefits, he said.

"I would be more than willing to pay all of my insurance coverage if I could find a study that suggests that increased benefits for employees significantly increases productivity."

"I sincerely hope that a plan can be developed that would be fair and beneficial to all concerned."

Judge To Speak At 'Reach-Out' Banquet

District Court Judge Ola M. Lewis will speak at the Concerned Citizens Operation Reach-Out Organization's (CCORO) ninth annual awards banquet in Loris, S.C., Aug. 6.

Lewis is the first African American and first woman to be appointed district judge over North Carolina's 13th Judicial District, which includes Brunswick, Bladen and Columbus counties. She is the youngest sitting district judge in the state, having been appointed to the position at age 27 by Governor Jim Hunt. Her speech topic will be "Your Destiny Is In Your Hands."

Also at the banquet, area citizens will be honored for their service to

their communities. Names of the honorees are kept secret until the night of the banquet.

Lewis, of Boiling Spring Lakes, was graduated with honors from Fayetteville State University with a major in accounting. She earned her juris doctor degree from North Carolina Central University School of Law and was admitted to the North Carolina Bar in 1990.

She also worked with N.C. House



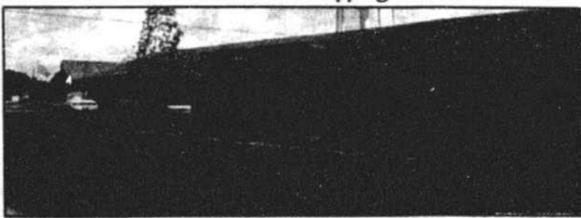
LEWIS

Speaker Dan Blue's law firm of Thigpen, Blue, Stephens and Fellers of Raleigh.

Prior to her appointment she

served as assistant district attorney at the Brunswick County courthouse. She is the daughter of Mose and Doris Lewis.

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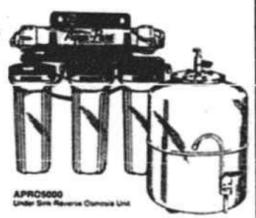
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