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NEWS

Social Security in limbo

By [Patrick O'Connor](#)

House Republican leaders are aiming to pass many bills this summer, but Social Security reform is not one of them.

In an e-mail sent to GOP aides and lobbyists late last week, House Majority Whip Roy Blunt's (R-Mo.) office outlined its list of "priority legislation" on the post-Memorial Day calendar. The list includes gun-manufacturer liability, postal reform and the Central America Free Trade Agreement.

Social Security reform was notably absent from the detailed list of legislative items.

As House GOP leaders roll out the summer schedule, the chances of an overhaul of the popular retirement program remain a major question mark. The e-mail from Blunt's office was far from binding, but it illustrates the uncertainty that still accompanies an entitlement overhaul as Republican leaders in both chambers plan to unveil reform packages later this summer.

Concerned about the impact of altering the so-called third rail of American politics, some Republicans have said they do not want Social Security reform to spill into 2006. But others maintain that Democrats will continue to criticize the GOP on Social Security throughout next year's election season, even if Republicans stop addressing the issue in 2005.

At the center of the debate is House Ways and Means Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), whose staff has been quietly crafting a comprehensive plan, the details of which are largely unknown.

While Thomas and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) craft independent legislation for their respective chambers, the biggest question for House leaders is whether to wait for the Senate to act before bringing a bill to the floor.

For months, GOP leaders in the House have maintained that the Senate should move first on this bill so that House Republicans are not forced to record a controversial vote on legislation that could die in the upper chamber.

"There's a view within the conference that says, 'Let's wait to see what the Senate produces,'" one House leadership aide said. "There is another view that says we can't wait because the Senate package might not be something we can work with."

Rep. Jim McCrery (R-La.), the chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on



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Social Security, said he still believes members would like the Senate to move first on a reform measure, but he dismissed the suggestion that Thomas and the Republican leadership in the House would lose any negotiating strength by following Grassley and his Senate colleagues.

Lawmakers appear to be a long way from conferencing on this legislation, but divergent plans could make the votes on a conference report hard for Republican leaders in both bodies to pass.

“My sense is that a majority of members over here would prefer the Senate to go first,” McCrery said.

Outside of a few hints, Thomas has adopted his usual bunker mentality on controversial legislation within his jurisdiction. His public comments hint at a broader reform, and his reticence to discuss particulars extends to members of the leadership.

“There has been very little communication,” another House leadership aide said. “Thomas is still tinkering on it.”

That uncertainty has made it difficult to prepare a rollout or educate members about a particular plan.

“Right now, we’re in a holding pattern,” the aide said.

Grassley is pressing to pass legislation out of his committee, but conservatives have argued that a compromise measure will fall short of their intended goals. Because of the makeup of the Finance Committee (11 Republicans, eight Democrats and one independent), Grassley will have to compromise on a range of policy matters to move a bill out of his panel.

Thomas, meanwhile, enjoys a more comfortable 24-17 ratio on his committee.

“I think the House should act first because they have a better take on this thing,” said Peter Ferrara, a policy adviser to the Institute for Policy Innovation and the Free Enterprise Fund who also helped write a reform bill introduced by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and Sen. John Sununu (R-N.H.). House GOP members “need to frame the issue in a way that is positive for them.”

During an April 29 media briefing the morning after Bush’s most recent primetime press conference, Thomas suggested that the House could vote on a Social Security bill in June. Leadership was caught off guard by the suggestion, according to two GOP leadership aides.

Thomas has since amended that timeline, telling CNBC’s Larry Kudlow last month, “I suggested June for the primary purpose of galvanizing people. It is possible; that’s obviously very ambitious, but I would rather be ambitious and proven wrong by having a slight delay before we move than to tell people we’re going to look at it in October, November or next year.”

At his April briefing, Thomas disputed the notion that the Senate would move first: “I never anticipated that the Senate would act first. I don’t know who anticipated the Senate would act first. ... This is not some narrow race.”

Bob Cusack contributed to this report.

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