

Slaughter Preps Rule To Avoid Direct Vote On Senate Bill

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by Anna Edney, with Billy House and Dan Friedman contributing

House Rules Chairwoman Louise Slaughter is prepping to help usher the healthcare overhaul through the House and potentially avoid a direct vote on the Senate overhaul bill, the chairwoman said Tuesday.

Slaughter is weighing preparing a rule that would consider the Senate bill passed once the House approves a corrections bill that would make changes to the Senate version.

Slaughter has not taken the plan to Speaker Pelosi as Democrats await CBO scores on the corrections bill. "Once the CBO gives us the score we'll spring right on it," she said.

As leaders put final touches on a corrections bill and await CBO scores, leaders, key committee chairmen and White House Chief of Staff Emanuel huddled Tuesday evening.

House Energy and Commerce Chairman Henry Waxman said members had a special message for Emanuel.

"He was certainly informed that we don't feel we want any deadline assigned to us," Waxman said.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said last week President Obama wanted the overhaul passed by March 18. Gibbs reiterated the deadline Tuesday.

"The information I gave out last week was based on conversations with staff that I've had here in the building, and I've been given nothing that would change that advice that I was given last week," he said at Tuesday's White House briefing.

House and Senate leaders have brushed off the mid-March push but have indicated they would like to pass something by Easter recess closer to the end of March. Senate Budget Chairman Kent Conrad said they expect to get preliminary scores today on the pieces CBO has in hand.

"Are we gonna get some scores from them tomorrow?" Conrad asked. "We anticipate we will. Final scores? No."

House members are concerned the Senate could fail to approve the corrections bill, making them nervous about passing the Senate bill with its much-maligned sweetheart deals for certain states.

"We're well beyond that," Pelosi said Tuesday, though she did not clarify.

While members await a final package and a CBO score, Senate Majority Whip Durbin said Democrats have asked Senate Parliamentarian Alan Frumin for information on how reconciliation can be used "with our goals" and what "the basic rules are."

Durbin said Democrats want to know how long the amendment process can go on. Republicans want to offer points of order that require 60 votes to overcome under the so-called Byrd rule. Democrats want points of order limited and straight majority votes. It will be up to the parliamentarian to rule what is subject to the Byrd rule and Democrats, Durbin indicated, are looking for guidance on how he views those questions.

"We're talking to him, but in fairness to him ... it is really hard to discuss this in theory. They have to see the bill and take a look at it," Durbin said.

Once a bill is complete and scored, Democrats could then show the parliamentarian the bill in an effort "to try to anticipate problems under the Byrd rule."

As Democrats hash out the final package, federal abortion funding is another hurdle. House Democratic leaders will have to reach an agreement with anti-abortion rights Democrats or find the votes to make up for a loss of a dozen or so who do not believe the Senate bill does enough to maintain current law prohibiting federal funds from being used for abortions except in the case of rape or incest.

Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Mich., who some considered a potential "no" vote based on the Senate abortion language, dispelled the notion Tuesday.

"I'll probably vote for the [Senate] bill," Kildee said. "I think the Senate language maintains the principles of the Hyde amendment."