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Montana Hospital Association

Max S. Baucus

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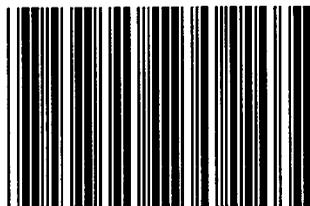
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BAUCUS

Montana Hospital Association

Hey Everyone. Max here. I'm sorry I can't be with you today but Senate business has kept me in Washington. Right now I'm working together with members of Congress to provide Montana's seniors with quality, affordable prescription drugs. As the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee – the panel with jurisdiction over Medicare – I'm at the head of the table working to do what's right for Montanans.

Passing a prescription drug bill by the Senate and House represents the best chance in years of providing a needed benefit to our nation's seniors and people with disabilities. We must seize the opportunity in front of us. Build on the momentum that we have. And pass a solid bill.

I am proud to have co-authored this historic Medicare bill with Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley. Our bill received 76 votes in a closely divided Senate. This bill will not only bring a guaranteed drug benefit to the roughly 140,000 Montana seniors, but also about \$100 million in extra funding to Montana's hospitals over the next ten years.

Our bill will also:

- boost payments to rural physicians
- increase rural home care
- extend the Flex Grant program – which has brought over \$2 million to Montana in the last few years. That's more than any other state.

Finding a compromise and getting a good bill passed is going to take work. The Senate bill passed with overwhelming support. But the House bill only passed by one vote. I'm committed to working together with the conference committee to reach a common-sense solution.

As a member of the conference committee, I've outlined four basic principles.

First, we need to have a solid fallback plan. The Senate bill includes a government backup system that steps in if private plans don't participate in the new drug benefit program. For seniors in rural states like Montana, this provision is crucial to ensure that they receive the same benefits as their urban counterparts. We've learned from past experiences. Just look at the thousands of Billings-area seniors who were left out in the cold after Montana's only Medicare HMO pulled the plug. If this turns out to be the case in the new drug program, we need to have a back-up plan -- which the House bill doesn't have.

Second, the conferees are faced with the controversial “premium support” reforms in the House bill. More than any other, this issue has the potential to deadlock negotiations and impede the momentum we have. In fact, premium support has the potential to increase Medicare premiums by up to 25 percent. That’s unacceptable.

Third, we must fight for strong low-income protections contained in the Senate bill. The neediest Medicare beneficiaries depend upon affordable cost-sharing and protections from the benefit gap. The Senate bill provides solid coverage to seniors below 160 percent of the federal poverty level. And it prevents those seniors from falling into the coverage gap, or the so-called ‘donut.’ The House bill provides low-income protections only to 150 percent of poverty and subjects those seniors to the coverage gap. That means a low-income senior who has more than \$2,000 in drug spending won’t get cost-sharing help.

Rural health has always been a top priority for me, which leads me to my fourth and final principle. Including the Senate-passed rural health provisions is a must. I’ve been proud to push successful rural initiatives throughout the years. Measures like the Sole Community Hospitals in the 1980s. The Medical Assistance Facility and Critical Access provisions in the 1980s and 90s. And now, legislation to equalize rural hospital base payments and improve the rural physician fee schedule. This also includes a full market basket update for Montana’s hospitals.

I remain optimistic that we can come to an agreement on a Medicare bill that will receive broad support. Remember, when Congress passed the original Medicare legislation 38 years ago, the House vote was 307 to 116, and the Senate vote was 70 to 24. My goal is to repeat that success.

On a final. I want to thank you. All of you. For the countless meetings we've had in Montana and Washington. The phone calls. All the e-mails. You're input on this bill has been so important to me. Thanks again for all you do.

All the best.