

Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2009

Van Hollen: Next round begins with health care address

Edwards continues to back public option

by C. Benjamin Ford | Staff Writer

President Obama's health care speech tonight could give a shot in the arm to the health care reform effort, local congressional leaders said.

"The great majority of our members are coming back from recess to start off where we left off," said U.S. Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Dist. 8).

Early on, he said, congressional representatives were expected to be spooked by noisy crowds showing up at town hall meetings.

"But the perception is the noisiest and the most disruptive voices did not represent the majority of the people," Van Hollen said.

Of the other U.S. representatives for Montgomery County, U.S. Rep. Donna Edwards (D-Dist. 4) remains a strong advocate for a health care bill that includes a public option, while U.S. Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R-Dist. 6) strongly opposes one.

Obama's speech "will be the opening bell in Round Two and an opportunity to go on the offense again," Van Hollen said.

Bartlett backs a House Republican plan that would allow employers more flexibility in the benefits offered and would lower health care costs by "decreasing defensive medicine, savings from health care efficiencies, sifting out waste, fraud and abuse," he said in a statement.

"The House Democratic bill will insert the federal government even more in decisions about health care by patients and their doctors," Bartlett said. "Clearly, we need health care reform. The reforms that I support would give patients more control, not less, over how they spend their money for health care."

Matthew Weinstein, federal issues director for Progressive Maryland and state coordinator for Health Care for American Now — Maryland, said the biggest obstacle to a government-financed public option for health insurance to compete with private insurers is the large number of donations going to Democratic Blue Dogs and Republicans from the insurance industry.

Many of the opponents to reform have cited public confusion over the issue as a reason to do nothing, while at the same time the opponents are helping to cause the confusion, Weinstein said.

"Obviously, the game starts anew now that the August recess is over and everyone knows they've got to get it done this year," Weinstein said. "September, October, November is the critical time. Supporters of reform are very fired up. They're looking to the president to carry out the mandate he was given with the election."