

Seniors are about to get the best advantage they have ever had since the founding of Medicare, and that is the new prescription drug program.

Next week, we will take the first step in the history of Medicare toward providing seniors with the help they need to pay for their prescription drugs. We made improvements to Medicare in a three-stage parcel so that it can be done right. What begins next week is that people begin to get information so they can select a prescription drug card where they will get 10- to 20-percent discounts on the drugs they are taking now. They can do it easily. They can go online and make a comparison, or they can call 1-800-MEDICARE and talk to live people, tell them what their drugs are, and get some help in gathering information. But they do not have to make the decision right now. That is just a telephone call to find out what the best possibility is right now.

So seniors can begin to run options through their minds and make the best selection for the drugs they take to get the biggest discount they possibly can.

This is an historic new benefit for seniors, and I am sorry there has been so much rhetoric surrounding the new law. There are some people who would prefer to have had an issue instead of a solution. But President Bush said we are going to have a prescription drug plan, and because he put the effort behind it, and because people here believed in it, we got a solution.

The solution comes in three parts: By June 1, seniors can get the drug card. That is the 2004 benefit. In 2005, for the first time seniors under Medicare will be able to get a physical, part of preventive medicine. We think that it is important that people find out what their medical problems are early and solve them. Preventive medicine is proven to be the most beneficial for the patient and absolutely the best from a pain standpoint, and it does prevent problems from happening, which is also a huge cost saver.

So get on the phone or get on the Internet. Seniors should call in, find out how the drug benefit works, and they will receive up to 10 to 20 percent off the prices they are paying now for their drugs. And if they happen to be a low-income senior who signs up for the card, they will receive an extra \$600 in credit in 2004 and 2005 to help pay for their prescriptions.

A number of the pharmaceutical companies also have agreed to provide their brands of drugs free of charge to seniors who exhaust their \$600 credit. That is going to cost the companies quite a bit of money.

Some people who say we didn't do anything, that there is a donut hole in the benefit. My response is, before we did the Medicare bill there was not even a donut. Now there is only a donut hole.

So in 2006, there will be more extensive and comprehensive coverage of prescription drugs, and a maximum

out-of-pocket spending of \$3,600 per person on drugs before catastrophic coverage kicks in.

There has been a tremendous benefit that has been delivered, but seniors have to participate if they are under Medicare. They have to do the research to find out what the best discount card for them would be.

There are two ways to do that. One is on the Internet at Medicare.gov. The other is by telephone at 1-800-MEDICARE. There will be live people on the phone to help seniors gather the information by June 1. Seniors do not have to sign up until June 1, but they should do the research and watch what happens to the price as competition kicks in. That is what this is, a number of companies vying for the business of seniors, all seniors, because all seniors will have help with their drug benefit—up to 10 to 20 percent, in some cases higher with the discount cards, but \$600 if they are low income, and some other benefits beyond that.

I hope we can end some of the rhetoric that is coming from the other side of the aisle about what this does and does not do, and we can get on board and help seniors to take advantage of what has been done. We talked about doing a benefit for years, and it did not get done. The President got behind it, pushed it, said we will have it done, and it is done. The reality is now that seniors have access to new benefits under Medicare, they can sign up for that with a drug discount card beginning next week. They do not have to sign up until June 1 with no penalty if they wait until then.

So let us do what is right by seniors and put politics aside for a moment. There will be plenty of time later for debating and campaigning. The great majority of seniors will benefit from the new Medicare discount cards.

Let me recap again what this bill does.

Next month, seniors can begin signing up for a Medicare-endorsed drug discount card that will save them 10 to 20 percent, at least, off retail drug prices. Seniors with low incomes will also get up to \$600 in credit to help them pay for their prescriptions.

Next year, Medicare will cover new preventive benefits, including a "Welcome to Medicare" physical exam for all Americans when they turn 65.

And in 2006, Medicare will offer voluntary, comprehensive drug coverage, with special benefits for seniors with low incomes and seniors with high drug bills.

The new drug benefit will be voluntary. It will offer the most help to those who need the help most. And it will provide much-needed security and peace of mind to seniors who worry about losing their life savings in the event of a devastating illness.

Despite all of these good things, there are still some who insist on "talking down" this new Medicare drug benefit. There are some who are trying to convince seniors and their families

that this is somehow a raw deal, a sham, or worse.

I hear that, and I know that other Members who voted for the Medicare bill from both sides of the aisle hear these things. And then I review again what the bill actually does, and I wonder what the problem is.

I think I have finally figured out the problem.

The problem is that this new Medicare drug benefit does not fit the tired old storyline about Republicans and healthcare.

We Republicans know the story all too well. I am surprised someone has not turned it into a children's book yet, so that kids can hear it when they are very young. Or maybe someone has.

The tired old story changes over time, but the main points are always the same.

The tired old story is that Republicans do not care about healthcare; they do not care if healthcare is affordable or available to everyone; they do not care if people with low incomes can get care when they need it; they do not care about seniors and their drug bills.

And the problem for the storytellers is that the facts on the Medicare drug benefit do not support their story.

Nevertheless, the storytellers persist in peddling this tale. It is so bad right now that some of the storytellers are trying to undo this important legislation before it even gets off the ground. In fact, some are completely reversing their longstanding positions on this issue, in an attempt to remove parts of the new Medicare law that are nearly identical to sections of their bills from recent years.

I understand why some in the minority are upset with the new Medicare law. They are upset because Republicans campaigned 2 years ago on a promise to pass a meaningful drug benefit for seniors, and we delivered on that promise.

But the reality is that now seniors have access to new benefits under Medicare, and they can sign up for the first new benefit—the drug discount card—beginning next week.

So let's do right by seniors and put politics aside for a moment. There will be plenty of time later for debating and campaigning.

The great majority of seniors will benefit from the new Medicare drug discount cards. Our job should be to work together to help seniors make the best decisions about their own healthcare and their own finances. Let's give them the right information so they can decide whether to sign up, and which card to choose. Let's do this now, because seniors deserve nothing less.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—
S. 1072

Mr. BOND. Madam President, I thank my colleague from Wyoming for giving

us some time. We are in another critical juncture in our efforts to pass a transportation bill, a highway bill, or SAFTEA. I propose a unanimous consent request. I ask unanimous consent the Senate proceed to the consideration of the House-passed highway bill, H.R. 3550; provided further that all after the enacting clause be stricken, and the text of S. 1072, as passed, be inserted in lieu thereof, the bill then be read a third time and passed; further, the Senate then insist on its amendment, request a conference with the House, and the Chair then be authorized to appoint conferees on the part of the Senate with a ratio of 11 to 10.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Nevada.

Mr. REID. Madam President, reserving the right to object, as my good friend, the distinguished Senator from Missouri, knows, the current extension expires tomorrow. In fact, the House of Representatives has already passed it. That measure is at the desk now. We need to do something today that will not require further action by the House because they will be gone.

I ask my colleague if he will agree that we need to act today on another extension of the highway bill, or if not today, tomorrow?

Would the Senator agree to modify his request and provide for the immediate consideration of H.R. 4219, which is the bill I referred to just a minute ago, a 2-month extension of the highway bill, and that the Senate proceed then to its passage, the bill be read, of course, three times, the motion to reconsider be laid on the table, and there be no intervening action or debate?

If we do this, it gives us time to continue our informal discussions about the larger bill.

I hope the Senate will agree to pass this today to ensure that there are no disruptions in highway projects. I ask my friend to modify his unanimous consent request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Does the Senator modify his request?

Mr. BOND. Madam President, I would be happy to accept that as an addendum to my request. The problem is, we need to appoint conferees to the House. I want to call attention to the fact that for 11 weeks we have been stalled. If we cannot appoint conferees, then I have a hold on the extension. So unless my good friend is willing to accept the unanimous consent request I propounded, I cannot accept his unanimous consent request.

Mr. REID. Further, Madam President—

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection to the request?

Mr. REID. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard. The Senator from Nevada.

Mr. REID. Madam President, how much time is remaining on everything?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There are 10 minutes remaining to the majority.

Mr. REID. That is all for morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mr. REID. Then we have a Burma discussion; is that right?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. After the 10 minutes there is another 15-minute period.

Mr. REID. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent I be allowed to speak on my position for 5 minutes and give equal time for the majority.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. MCCAIN. I reserve the right to object. I will not object, but I will point out to the Senator that we are prepared to move on to the Burma issue, and it is important. I know what the Senator wants to discuss: the importance of passing the highway bill and his objection and the usual degeneration that has taken place around here. We would like to talk about Burma and a woman who is a Nobel Peace Prize winner who is being kept under house arrest. But I will not object to the request of the Senator from Nevada.

Mr. REID. I apologize to the Senators here because the time has been allotted to him. I do appreciate the 5 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. REID. We really do need to pass this 2-month extension. I say to my friend from Missouri and all others here, Senator INHOFE and I have worked very hard to move this bill along. The 11 weeks the Senator talked about, of course, a lot of that time we have been out of session. I have spoken to Chairman YOUNG. He wants a bill. Senator INHOFE wants a bill. A bill has, in fact, passed both bodies by overwhelming majorities. To not allow this 2-month extension will cause a layoff of 5,000 people beginning Saturday. They will no longer be able to work. These are employees of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Not agreeing to the extension will cause new highway and bridge projects to be shelved. It will stop reimbursement payments to States for projects that already are incurred. It will halt safety grants, stop transportation projects in cities and towns, interrupt enforcement of motor carrier safety regulations, and disrupt safety inspections at the Nation's borders. This is a temporary extension designed to provide time for the Congress to complete its work on a fully funded authorization. The extension is a means to an end, and the end is the passage of a highway bill, so we need to get to work on that.

Madam President, we have tried very hard to pass this bill. We got 76 votes to pass it and get it to the President. We need to keep working on it. The Nation expects nothing less.

As we discussed yesterday, the Republican leadership is going to meet later on to decide what they are going to do with this bill. I think that is ap-

propriate. As I indicated, I wish that I and others were in on that discussion, but I am glad they are meeting.

Madam President, the Americans for Transportation Mobility, which includes hundreds of organizations—hundreds, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Associated General Contractors, International Union of Operating Engineers—and, as I say hundreds of other organizations, including organizations from the State of Missouri—the Kirksville Area Chamber of Commerce, Lake of the Ozarks West Chamber of Commerce, Missouri Chamber of Commerce, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce—in effect, they have written a letter to each Senator. Among other things they say:

As business and labor, we will only support a final conference report at the Senate investment level for a six-year bill. To that end, we support agreement on funding levels for the legislation before entering into a formal conference committee. We urge that final legislation meet our minimum \$318 billion objective.

So these hundreds of groups disagree with the Senator from Missouri, including people from his own State.

I know how strongly he feels about a highway bill. I have talked to him. He has discussed this publicly and privately. But I think in effect he is shooting himself in the foot by not agreeing to the 2-month extension. We have made progress in the few meetings that the two staffs have had.

So I say to my friend, we have cleared on our side—there are no objections on our side to having a 2-month extension. I think it is a heavy weight for my friend to carry, to bring down everything that is going on around the country tomorrow by objecting to this 2-month extension.

If that is the weight he wants to bear, that is what he has to bear. But I am very disappointed. As the Senator knows, we have had problems with conferences. That doesn't mean we can't complete important legislation as we have done on numerous occasions without a formal conference. In this instance, we may be able to do a conference, as I have spoken about with Senator INHOFE. We need to do a little more work this morning.

I ask unanimous consent, in closing, to have printed in the RECORD the letter from Americans for Transportation Mobility, together with its members.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

APRIL 23, 2004.

DEAR SENATOR: The House and Senate will soon begin meeting to reconcile differences on reauthorization of the federal highway and transit law (H.R. 3550/S. 1072). The undersigned organizations firmly believe there is no more important legislation this year to benefit all industries, all communities, all working people and the American economy.

As we have stated previously, the appropriate investment blueprint for this legislation is provided by the U.S. Department of Transportation's recent Conditions and Performance Report, which outlines that the federal investment share necessary to begin

improving the nation's surface transportation network is \$375 billion over the next six years. The bi-partisan leaders of the House Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) Committee identified this goal earlier this year and we continue to support their efforts to reach this objective.

The Senate passed TEA-21 reauthorization proposal (S. 1072) would authorize a total of \$318 billion for federal surface transportation programs, with \$294 billion in guaranteed highway and transit investment over the next six years. The Senate investment levels represent the mid-point between the nation's surface transportation needs and the current inadequate federal highway and transit funding levels.

As business and labor, we will only support a final conference report at the Senate investment level for a six-year bill. To that end, we support agreement on funding levels for the legislation before entering into a formal conference committee. We urge that final legislation meet our minimum \$318 billion objective.

A \$318 billion investment level would create and support over 2 million American job opportunities and help address the growing deterioration of the nation's highway, bridge and transit infrastructure facilities. With the Department of Transportation stating that 47,500 U.S. jobs are created for every \$1 billion of federal highway and transit investment, investment levels below \$318 billion would miss a critical opportunity to create badly needed jobs.

The U.S. is facing a transportation infrastructure deficit that can no longer be ignored. Traffic crashes cost our society \$230 billion per year and inadequate roadway conditions are a factor in one-third of these accidents. Traffic congestion robs \$70 billion per year from the U.S. economy and denies Americans time with their families. A recent study has shown the number of traffic bottlenecks nationwide have grown from 167 to 233, while only one-quarter of households have access to adequate public transportation. This situation will only get worse if we do not enact a reauthorization bill of at least \$318 billion.

The Senate-proposed investment levels are attainable without raising the federal gas tax or user fee, or increasing the federal deficit. It continues the important principle of paying for highways, bridges and transit through the Highway Trust Fund. As such, the \$318 billion investment level complies with surface transportation program financing parameters identified by the Bush Administration.

We strongly urge the conferees and the bipartisan House/Senate Leadership to support a \$318 billion investment level. Our business and labor organizations, and the American people, will accept nothing less. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Americans for Transportation Mobility,
Transportation Construction Coalition.

Mr. REID. I extend my appreciation to everyone on the other side of the aisle for extending me the extra 5 minutes.

Mr. BOND. Madam President, I want to reclaim my time. First, let me say I know all the pressures. I know the people my good friend from Nevada mentioned. They want a highway bill at \$318 billion that we passed. I want one. I have long quotations. I have all kinds of people behind me. The chairman of the committee, Senator INHOFE wants it. I know that Senator REID wants it and Senator JEFFORDS wants it. But do you know something, we can't do any-

thing because we are opposed, we are blocked by the minority from going to conference.

A lot of people in America don't understand. They have heard about filibusters. They know we filibuster judges around here. They know we filibuster bills. But this is the first time I know of where a bill that has passed this body with 76 votes has been stopped from going to conference by the opposition of the minority.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Will the Senator yield?

Mr. BOND. I am happy to yield to the assistant leader.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I say to my friend from Missouri, it is not actually the first time this has happened. It has become, actually, repetitious. They prevented us from going to conference on the CARE Act, the Bankruptcy Act, the Workforce Investment Act, the Patients Safety Act, not to mention the Transportation bill. So there is a pattern, I would say to my friend from Missouri, which is that the minority is saying to the majority of the Senate and to the majority in the House: You make the bill exactly the way we want it or we won't let the legislative process go forward. Complete stalemate.

Mr. BOND. Madam President, I thank my colleague and neighbor for the clarification. I have never seen, in my history, a bill passing the Senate with this much support, that is so important to our Nation, being held up. It is 11 weeks since we passed a highway bill, the \$318 billion Surface Transportation Equity Act. To get it to conference, we have to have the approval of the minority.

I am taking this step. I am taking this radical step because the people of America need to know. When I go home, they say: How come we don't have a highway bill? They don't understand that we are being blocked from going to conference. We can't work out the differences between the House and Senate unless we can go to conference. If there has ever been a bipartisan bill, I believe this bill is it.

Chairman INHOFE with Senator JEFFORDS, Senator REID and I have worked, I think collegially and effectively, in bringing a good bill to the floor of the Senate. I appreciate the work that my colleagues did.

It is obvious when the bill passes with 76 votes that it was a good bipartisan bill. We can't tell what is going to come out of conference. I am going to go into conference saying we need a \$318 billion bill. But if we can't go to conference, we can't even take that step.

We have been delayed and delayed from going to conference. That is what, unfortunately, we have to explain to our constituents around the country—that the transportation system lifeline to our country and our economy is being held up. We cannot take the next step and make the major investment in the future of this system to promote increased employment, decrease con-

gestion, enhance security, to lay the sinews of economic development for the future and, most of all, provide safety on our highways.

There are 43,000 Americans killed on the highways each year; in Missouri, more than three a day, and at least one and probably more of those are killed because of inadequate highways. What can we do about it? We can do something in the Senate. But we don't get the job done. We have to sit down and work with our colleagues in the House and come up with a compromise proposal that I hope looks like our bill in the Senate.

I am going to fight as hard as I can when we can get to conference. But until we can get to conference, we don't know and there is no hope of us getting a new bill. That is why I have placed a hold on the extension of the highway bill. Yes, this is a drastic measure. How long are we going to kick the ball down the road? I objected to holding up the first extension, but we have had extension after extension after extension. When are we going to get a bill? It is very simple. We can have this bill. We can have the extension if the minority will agree to let us appoint conferees so this can go to conference.

I assure you that we will continue to work, Senator INHOFE, our ranking members, Senators JEFFORDS and REID, as we did before to get a bill that looks as much like the Senate bill as we possibly can, but until we do that, I am going to continue to object to the extension. I regret we have to take this drastic action, but the people of America and the people concerned about highways need to know what is causing this problem.

I thank the Chair. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Nevada.

Mr. REID. Madam President, first of all, to show how unrelated the statements are to reality, we couldn't have gone to conference 11 weeks ago. The House didn't pass the bill until the first part of April. The bill has been passed for 3 weeks. So there is no 11 weeks. That is certainly not a valid statement.

I repeat: We need to pass this 2-month extension in an effort to get this bill moving. If we don't pass a 2-month extension, 5,000 people are going to be laid off starting Saturday. This is no joke. This is not hyperbole. This is a fact. People will be laid off and construction projects around the country will come to standstill.

We can talk about the fact that in previous months we have enacted into law many pieces of legislation. We have entered into law 60 pieces of legislation without a conference. We have pre-conferenced them. We can do that on the highway bill.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kentucky.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, am I correct that under the consent