

I am a cosponsor of legislation that would begin to fix this bill. It would enable seniors and disabled Medicare enrollees to bypass the private insurance market, to say, no, I don't want to compare 30 or 40 different insurance plans and 30 or 40 different insurance company brochures, and talk to 30 or 40 different insurance agents. I want to bypass the private insurance market, check a box, and simply add a prescription drug benefit to my Medicare. I get to choose my doctor as a Medicare beneficiary, I get to choose the hospital, I ought to be able to choose my drug formulary.

It would also authorize Medicare to negotiate bulk discounts on prescription drugs. That is the way the Veterans' Administration does it. That is the way most countries in the world do it. That is why drug prices are a third or a fourth or a fifth in every other country in the world, much, much lower prices than there are in the United States.

In other words, this legislation, this new law as we propose the changes, would give seniors and taxpayers a break. Perhaps Secretary Leavitt will make use of his Ohio trip to announce the administration's support for these bills. Perhaps.

May 15 is the cutoff for Medicare beneficiaries to enroll in the new prescription drug program. If they enroll after that date, believe it or not, they have to pay a penalty for late enrollment. Let's think about that. My Republican colleagues in Congress and the Bush administration have finally acknowledged that the drug program got off to a rocky start and is very confusing to seniors. Seniors have sat on the phone for up to 2 hours waiting for someone from the Medicare hotline to help with enrollment questions.

I talked to seniors in Vandalia, Ohio, in Cincinnati, in Norton, and in London, Ohio. All of them say this Medicare drug benefit is way too confusing. Not just prospective enrollees are confused, but State agencies, local service agencies, Federal bureaucrats, even the insurers who offer the new coverage. Finding the right answer to an enrollment question is almost as difficult as choosing which of the 30 or 40 plans to enroll in.

And when seniors did enroll in a plan, there were paperwork problems, there were systems problems, there were transition problems, there were formulary problems, and there were problems in the drugstores where one pharmacist at least, one pharmacy in London, Ohio, had to close because of the additional cost imposed on these small businesses by this bureaucracy created by a Congress that listened to the drug industry and the HMOs more than it listened to drugstores, to pharmacists or to seniors.

The various failings of this drug program made the news virtually every day for 4 months. Maybe Secretary Leavitt will make use of his trip to Ohio to announce the Republican lead-

ership is listening, they have changed their minds, and they want to see a better law. Maybe.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Maryland (Mr. CUMMINGS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. CUMMINGS addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

A message from the Senate by Ms. Curtis, one of its clerks, announced that the Senate has passed a Joint Resolution and a Concurrent Resolution of the following titles in which the concurrence of the House is requested:

S.J. Res. 28. Joint resolution approving the location of the commemorative work in the District of Columbia honoring former President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

S. Con. Res. 60. Concurrent resolution designating the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, as America's National Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

BLUE DOG COALITION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 4, 2005, the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. ROSS) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, this evening, as every Tuesday evening, the members of the 37-Member strong fiscally conservative Democratic Blue Dog Coalition come to the floor of the United States House of Representatives, here at our Nation's Capitol, to address the debt, the deficit, and tonight also the budget.

And for those of you who have walked the halls of Congress, it is easy to spot when you are walking by a Member's office that is a member of the fiscally conservative Blue Dog Coalition because you will see one of these posters, one of these posters that displays the current national debt. And every American citizen shares the National debt.

As you can see, at the moment, the U.S. national debt is \$3,378,143,406,405 and some change. And for every man, woman, and child in America, including those being born this hour, your share of the national debt is \$28,000.

We raise these issues for a number of reasons, Mr. Speaker. It is hard now to remember, but from 1998 to 2001, our Nation enjoyed a balanced budget. We had a surplus. We could meet many of America's priorities. But today, for the sixth year in a row, we have the largest budget deficit ever in our Nation's history. Our Nation is borrowing a billion dollars a day. We are sending \$279 million a day to Iraq, \$57 million a day to Afghanistan, a billion a day we are borrowing, and on top of that we are spending half a billion dollars a day simply paying interest, not principal but just interest on the debt that we already have.

As members of the Blue Dog Coalition, we believe it is time to get our Nation's fiscal house in order. Now, the Republicans in this year's budget they will present this week on the floor of the United States House of Representatives indicates that their priorities do not reflect our priorities or our values. We are going to spend a lot of the time this evening talking about that.

They will say, well, we are trying to balance the budget, which they do not do. They will say that, well, we are cutting this program or that program to try and reduce the deficit. But what they do not tell you is that their budget includes \$1.7 trillion over the next 10 years in tax cuts that primarily benefit those earning over \$400,000 a year.

So when they talk about cutting programs, they will tell you that they are trying to cut programs to reduce these numbers. Not so. Because you don't cut taxes for folks earning over \$400,000 a year at a time when you are in a nation that is borrowing a billion dollars a day; at a time when you are in a nation that is spending half a billion a day simply paying interest on the debt you already have.

So it is about priorities. And the Republican priorities in this year's budget include cuts to the Dale Bumpers Small Farms Research Center in my Congressional District. In fact, there are 25 or 26 agricultural research centers all over America that are being cut. They create good paying jobs in these rural communities that invest in the kind of agricultural research that our farm families so desperately need.

The development of the Dale Bumpers Small Farms Research Center began back in 1977 with their initial work starting in 1980. It is a partnership among three agencies, Agricultural Research Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

Their mission, the mission at the Agricultural Research Service unit at the Dale Bumpers Small Farms Research Center, is to develop scientific principles and technologies to enhance the profitability and sustainability of small-scale farms, because they are threatened by a lack of profitability. Yet in this year's budget, in this year's budget that the President submitted to this Congress and that this Republican Congress may very well pass this week, it includes zeroing out, eliminating 25 or 26 of these agricultural research centers all across America.

Again, this budget is about priorities, and this budget that we are going to vote on this week does not reflect my priorities or my values. It certainly does not represent the kind of conservative small-town values that I was raised on, where I was raised to value our farm families who simply try to do their best to provide us with a safe and reliable source for food and fiber.

We can get into a debate about how we have become too dependent on foreign oil. If we are not too careful, we