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G.O.P. Rethinking Bid to Overhaul Medicare Rules

By [CARL HULSE](#) and [JACKIE CALMES](#)

WASHINGTON — House Republicans signaled Thursday that they were backing away from the centerpiece of their budget plan — a proposal to overhaul [Medicare](#) — in a decision that underscored both the difficulties and political perils of addressing the nation’s long-term fiscal problems.

While top Republicans insisted that they remained committed to the Medicare initiative, which had become the target of intense attacks by Democrats and liberal groups in recent weeks, the lawmaker who would have to turn the proposal into legislation said he had no plans to do so any time soon.

The lawmaker, Representative Dave Camp, Republican of Michigan and chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, said that while he still supports the party’s Medicare approach, opposition from Democrats made it pointless to proceed.

“I’m not interested in talking about whether the House is going to pass a bill that the Senate shows no interest in,” Mr. Camp said in an appearance at the National Press Club. “I’m not interested in laying down more markers. I am interested in solutions.”

Coupled with remarks by other House Republican leaders, his statement suggested that the party’s Medicare proposal had been shelved, even though the party’s lawmakers had taken a risky vote to pass

the budget in the House just last month, and in the past two weeks had attempted to sell it to constituents in often-stormy town hall meetings.

Republicans suggested that they would continue to press to rein in the growing costs of Medicare, even if not through the current proposal, which would transform the program into one in which the federal government subsidized the purchase of private health insurance coverage by Americans 65 and older.

Putting aside the proposal would remove one of the biggest points of contention between the parties as they address both the nation's long-term budget problems and the more immediate need for an agreement on raising the federal [debt limit](#).

The development came as Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) held a first negotiating session with members of both parties to try to find a deal that would allow Congress to raise the debt ceiling this year.

Republicans are demanding spending cuts and other measures to reduce the budget deficit as the price of support for raising the debt ceiling.

The Republican Medicare plan was never likely to be adopted as part of any deal on the debt limit. But the decision by Republicans to pull back the proposal was a tacit acknowledgment that the politics of entitlement reform remain so volatile that pressing ahead in the face of intense Democratic opposition could cost the party dearly at the polls.

As they rolled out their budget last month, Republicans hailed the Medicare plan as a bold attempt to address chronic deficits. All but four House Republicans voted for the budget proposal, which was developed by Representative [Paul D. Ryan](#) of Wisconsin, chairman of the House Budget Committee.

[President Obama](#) and Congressional Democrats quickly went on the attack, condemning the Republican plan. Mr. Camp's statement on Medicare was in sync with similar comments by other top Republicans, including Representatives [Eric Cantor](#) of Virginia, the majority leader, and Mr. Ryan. They said Republicans recognized that they were unlikely to win approval of their sweeping Medicare

overhaul in the debt-reduction talks that began at Blair House on Thursday.

“The reality is this president has excoriated our budget plan and the Medicare proposal in the plan,” Mr. Cantor told reporters.

The negotiators, who agreed to meet next on Tuesday, are combing their respective budget proposals to find common ground.

But given the parties’ differences and the short time frame for negotiations before Congress must increase the debt limit, both sides have indicated that any compromise is likely to be based less on specific policy changes than on proposals setting deficit-reduction targets for coming years. Those targets would be combined with triggers to make automatic cuts in spending — and tax increases, in Democrats’ view — if the targets are exceeded.

While Mr. Cantor outlined the House-passed Ryan budget as Republicans’ opening bid in the Blair House negotiations, he said little about the Medicare proposals, participants said.

“He didn’t need to talk about it in that room,” said one participant. “Everyone knows it’s dead.”

Still, the leadership comments surprised many Republican lawmakers, who said they had expected to move forward on the plan.

Some members — especially freshmen from districts with steep re-election hills to scale — were upset to hear that the plan could be scotched after they had voted for the budget proposal and then invested so much hard work trying to sell it back home over the spring recess.

“I would be very disappointed if we didn’t follow through,” said Representative Joe Walsh, whose district lies in the Chicago suburbs. “We have spent, gosh, a month or two now trying to educate the American people to a pretty good reception. I appreciate the chairman’s notion, but I would continue to respectfully challenge him to get this thing through committee.”

Representative Bobby Schilling of Illinois said backing down now would be giving in “to lies and deceit told by the other side.”

“We’ve just got to address this problem,” he said. “Is it going to be perfect? No, but it needs to be addressed.”

The House speaker, [John A. Boehner](#), said Thursday that the party was not backing away from the Medicare overhaul. But he said Mr. Camp’s view was a recognition of the “political realities that we face.”

Democrats said it did not matter if Republicans decided to jettison their Medicare plan because they had already voted for it as part of the budget.

“The Republicans are slowly realizing their plan to privatize Medicare is a political disaster,” said Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#) of New York, the No. 3 Democrat. “But until they renounce their vote for it, they are still going to own it.”

Mr. Ryan said he believed the future of the Medicare proposal would be decided in next year’s elections.

“At the end of the day, I think 2012 is going to make the decision,” Mr. Ryan said at a budget forum Thursday, predicting voters would back the plan he said protects Medicare from insolvency. “The people are ahead of the political class.”

Jennifer Steinhauer contributed reporting.



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