

Conservatives express surprise as Bush boosts Medicare costs

By ALAN FRAM

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservatives expressed little surprise, and anger in private, as administration officials said President Bush now estimates the new Medicare overhaul law will cost a third more than projected when Congress passed the legislation last year.

The president's budget, to be released Monday, will also project a federal deficit this year of about \$520 billion, congressional aides said. That would far exceed this year's \$375 billion, the highest ever in dollar terms.

The budget will estimate the price of retooling Medicare and adding prescription drug benefits at \$534 billion over the decade ending 2013, officials said. The figures, first revealed Thursday by congressional aides speaking on condition of anonymity, were confirmed by administration officials.

While hunting for the votes they needed to nudge the bill through, Bush and administration officials as well as top congressional Republicans told wavering conservatives they believed the bill's costs would track the nonpartisan Congress-

sional Budget Office's \$395 billion estimate.

Bush signed the Medicare bill Dec. 8, giving him a legislative victory that he intends to promote during his re-election campaign.

"It points again to the No. 1 agenda item that needs to be addressed by Congress," Rep. Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas, said of the new figures. "We've got to protect the family budget from the federal budget."

Hensarling was among several conservatives who voted for the measure after being told by Bush and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., that the costs should follow the CBO projections.

Other conservatives said privately they were owed an explanation as to why the White House did not provide them with the figures before they voted. Administration officials said the new cost estimate was not ready until now.

"Very messy," said Joe Antos, a health policy expert at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, describing the reaction among conservative lawmakers.

He said many of them felt "brow beaten" into backing the legislation,

“The president made a commitment to seniors and he kept it, and part of that was providing prescription drug coverage. The president is committed to making sure cost controls continue in Medicare.”

Trent Duffy
White House spokesman

which passed the House in November by five votes after leaders held the roll call open nearly three hours while nailing down support.

The new figures, the first time the White House has released projections of the Medicare bill's costs, could deepen a rift between the White House and conservatives already upset over spending and budget deficits on Bush's watch.

White House spokesman Trent Duffy and other administration officials said the estimating differences with the Congressional Budget Office was understandable and relatively close, considering the millions of beneficiaries, hundreds of billions of dollars and time period

involved.

"The president made a commitment to seniors and he kept it, and part of that was providing prescription drug coverage," Duffy said. "The president is committed to making sure cost controls continue in Medicare."

Bush included a 10-year, \$400 billion estimate for his broadly written plan for overhauling Medicare in his budget last February.

Democrats said the new estimate meant a bonus for drug companies and managed health care organizations, which have joined the ranks of their favorite election-year targets.

"Another \$140 billion squan-

House clutter may disguise problems that run deeper

DEAR ABBY: My husband has been working out of the country for almost a year. Since he's been gone, I have turned into a housekeeping slob.

I have a demanding job where I pick up the slack for missing personnel. I am one of a few musicians at church on Sundays. In addition, I'm struggling with a chronic back problem. I'm overwhelmed.

Cleaning the house has taken a back seat to all the other things I do, and now it is full of clutter. It's out of control.

Most of the time I feel like I don't care. How can I get out of this slump?

I feel guilty when I watch my neighbors taking care of their homes. Please help me get going.

— NOT MOTIVATED

DEAR NOT: Has it occurred to you that you might be depressed by your husband's long absence? The first thing to do is schedule an appointment with your physician for a complete check-up and a frank talk.

Once that's done, ask a friend or two if they'll help you with the house over a weekend. Treat them to dinner and a movie afterward.

Of course, for the same amount of money, you could probably hire someone to help you, but enlisting the help of friends would be more fun. And from my perspective, contact with friends is what you need right now. Good luck.

DEAR ABBY: There is a husband and wife in our church who drive everyone crazy. We live in a small rural area and most of our congregation are simple, modest folk.

These people live in a neighboring town in a very pretentious, affluent neighborhood.

They drive an expensive SUV and are extravagant in everything they do. Their children misbehave often, and the whole family acts like they're better than everyone else. They are all spoiled, lacking in discipline, and seem to have behavior or emotional problems.

Despite their bravado, they don't realize that everybody can see through them.

Maybe if you remind these individuals that God can see them, whether they are in church or not, they'll know they aren't fooling anyone.

— MISERABLE METHODIST IN NEW YORK

DEAR MISERABLE METHODIST: God can see you, too. And he has asked me to relay this message: "Happy are they who tend to their own gardens and waste not their time complaining about their neighbors' shortcomings."

DEAR ABBY: For three years in high school, I was sexually harassed by a boy I'll call "Tim." When he graduated, I thought my troubles were over. They're not. Due to a disability, I will not be going away to college. Tim is not going away for the same reason. We will both be attending the same community college.

I have contacted the head of security at the college and will be speaking to him soon.

How do I keep Tim from destroying my dignity like he did in high school? I am terrified of him.



Abigail Van Buren

• Dear Abby

— FEARFUL IN OHIO

DEAR FEARFUL: First of all, let's hope this young man has matured past the point where he would harass you. Neither of you are children anymore.

You are doing the right thing to take your concerns to the head of security.

If that fails to resolve the problem, document any and all incidents and promptly report the harassment to the police department.

DEAR ABBY: My 17-year-old son, "George," has a learning disability. I have to fight the school system to keep teachers from destroying his self-esteem.

However, an even bigger problem is that my mother and my sister's boyfriend, "Tony," say cruel things to George.

Mother gives George a hard time because he won't try to read. I constantly tell her that he struggles hard to read, but doesn't comprehend what he's reading — and it may never get better.

Tony ridicules my son because he's a little overweight. How can I give George healthy self-esteem if others tear it down?

I also have a problem with the way Mother and Tony treat my 13-year-old daughter, "Allison."

Allison is a tomboy who doesn't like to wear dresses. She prefers baggy clothes.

She is a good kid. She's not into drugs, alcohol or sex. Mother berates her for not looking "like a lady," and Tony calls her a lesbian.

I hate to keep my children from seeing my mother or my sister, but it has reached the point where neither George nor Allison wants anything to do with them.

How should I handle these so-called "loved ones" without starting a major war?

— MOM OF WONDERFUL CHILDREN IN INDIANA

DEAR MOM: As a parent, it is your job to protect your children and to act as their advocate. If you haven't done so, tell your mother and your sister's boyfriend that their name-calling is destructive and you want it stopped immediately.

If they refuse, distance yourself and the children from their painful and abusive influence. Remember, your first obligation is to your children — not your mother, and certainly not Tony.

DEAR ABBY: I'm married to a

man who limits his social life to our relatives and me.

That makes it very difficult for me to enjoy my own pursuits. When I want to go out, I have to give my husband a good reason and tell him every detail.

I invite him to movies and dinners out, but he's never interested. I try not to keep secrets from him, but I've reached the point where I feel like rebelling against his control.

It's wonderful that he loves to spend time with me, but I believe all couples require some outside interests and friends to maintain a bal-

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dered on fly-by-night HMOs and astronomical drug industry profits. It's a proud day for the Bush administration," said Rep. Sherrod Brown of Ohio, top Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce's health subcommittee.

Nearly everyone expects the Medicare bill to get increasingly costly in coming years as the huge baby boom generation retires and medical expenses grow. Douglas Holtz-Eakin, director of the Congressional Budget Office, has said the measure's costs in its second decade could exceed \$1.5 trillion.

Administration officials said they could not initially explain precisely why the projections differed. But Antos said it was probably due to estimating differences over the number of people expected to use federally subsidized health plans and health care tax breaks the bill creates.

Meanwhile, the administration released some positive news about their forthcoming budget, including proposals for:

—\$45 million — a fourfold increase — for cleaning up the Great Lakes.

—An \$18 million increase — to

\$122.5 million — for the National Endowment for the Arts.

—\$60 million for a cattle identification system and other mad cow-related programs, up from \$13 million this year.

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