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Hope for reform endures despite Rosty indictment

by FARAH KOSTRESKI

Colleagues and constituents alike reacted cautiously last week to the 17-count felony indictment of House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski (D-IL) and its potential impact on the ability of Congress to pass comprehensive health care reform this year.

Rostenkowski rejected a plea-bargain offer and vowed to fight the May 31 indictment handed down by U.S. Attorney Eric H. Holder Jr. The 66-year-old Chicago pol and consummate deal maker said in a statement last week that he refused to "make any deals with"

federal prosecutors.

The congressman, who has chaired Ways and Means since 1981, said he will present "a compelling case" to the jury, adding: "I am confident that I will be vindicated, and I look forward to the return of the gavel." Per House rules, Rosty is able to retain his committee seat, though not the chairmanship, while his trial proceeds.

The indictment charged the powerful congressman with creating "an elaborate scheme to defraud Congress and the [U.S.] government" during 20 of his 35 years in the House. Among the alleged abuses cited are mail and wire fraud, embezzlement, concealment of material facts, conspiracy, and

witness tampering.

President Clinton released a statement last week noting that Rostenkowski has the right to "his day in court." He also credited the chairman with creating momentum for health-reform legislation that he is "confident" will pass this year.

Other sentiments echoed around Capitol Hill:

■ House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-MO), who some observers say may assume an even more crucial role in steering reform legislation, said Rostenkowski's departure wouldn't thwart health-reform progress and that he expected to have a bill on the House floor "in the coming months."

■ House Speaker Thomas S. Foley



Rostenkowski

(D-WA) voiced his confidence in the ability of Rep. Sam Gibbons (D-FL), who ascends to serve as acting chairman of the Ways and Means Committee while Rosty fights his legal battle.

course on reform but "certainly means that [Gibbons] understands what single payer is and isn't," the spokesman said.

■ Ways and Means ranking Republican Bill Archer (R-TX) kept mum about the impact of Rostenkowski's troubles. An aide said last week that Archer was purposefully avoiding making any statements that might "damage his relationship with Democrats or Rostenkowski."

■ A spokesman for the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA), Washington, DC, called Rostenkowski's predicament "unfortunate" and said the group is "hopeful the committee leadership will maintain the spirit" of what had been "promising" discussions between Rostenkowski and HIAA President Bill Gradison on easing insurance reform.