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The Washington Post

House Dems on track for vote on \$940B health bill

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The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON -- House Democrats are pushing to the brink of passage a landmark, \$940 billion health care overhaul bill that would simultaneously deliver on President Barack Obama's promise to expand coverage while slashing the deficit, a strategy aimed at attracting support from the party's fiscal conservatives.

The 10-year plan would provide coverage to more than 30 million people now uninsured through a combination of tax credits for middle class households and an expansion of the Medicaid program for low income people. Release of the legislation later Thursday sets the stage for a House vote on Sunday.

It would restructure one-sixth of the U.S. economy in the biggest expansion of the social safety net since Medicare was created in 1965. It would also impose new obligations on individuals and businesses, requiring for the first time that most Americans carry health insurance and penalizing medium-sized and large companies that don't provide coverage for their workers.

Hospitals and doctors, drug companies and insurers would gain millions of new paying customers, but they would also have to adjust to major changes. Medicare cuts would force hospitals to operate more efficiently or risk going out of business. Insurance companies would face unprecedented federal regulation. Health care industries would be hit with new federal taxes. Upper-income households would face a new tax on investment earnings.

Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, the Number 2 House Democrat, said the economy would be stronger in the long run. The bill is estimated to reduce federal deficit by more than \$130 billion over its first 10 years - and \$1.2 trillion in the second decade, he said. Hoyer called it the biggest deficit reduction bill since the 1990s, when President Bill Clinton put the federal budget on a path to surplus.

Authoritative numbers from the Congressional Budget Office were expected later Thursday, but Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., was already pleased. "We loved their number," said Pelosi, who is privy to the estimates.

"I think the momentum is growing for this bill," said Hoyer. "The more and more people have looked at this bill...a greater number of people are becoming more comfortable."

The Democrats' drive took on a growing sense of inevitability, picking up endorsements Wednesday from a longtime liberal holdout and from a retired Roman Catholic bishop and nuns who broke with church leaders over the bill's abortion provisions.