

Gov. Herbert calls his plan for Medicaid expansion a tough sell

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SALT LAKE CITY — Gov. Gary Herbert described his plan for Medicaid expansion as a tough sell to the Utah Legislature, especially over the issue of accepting the federal funding available, during a meeting Thursday with the Deseret News Editorial Board.

"We've got to get people to understand this ought to be based on common sense and adhere to concern for the taxpayer as opposed to ideology — because we don't like Obamacare, therefore we won't take a federal dollar," Herbert said.



The GOP governor said there is resistance by some lawmakers to using federal dollars offered through the Affordable Care Act.

House Speaker Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, in her opening day address to the House last week, criticized the governor as an "inaction figure" and said the state should reject what she called "a trap" and "an out-in-the-open bait-and-switch" in Medicaid expansion.

Herbert announced just before the start of the 2014 Legislature that he had decided "doing nothing" about expanding Medicaid coverage was no longer an option, but he has yet to detail his plan.

"I don't want to presuppose or limit myself to anything," Herbert said. "I've got to get the Legislature to buy off on the fact that federal dollars can be used appropriately. That seems to be the obstacle right now."

The governor labeled that a false debate.

"This is all being paid for by taxpayers money," he said, whether it comes from state coffers or Washington, D.C. "It doesn't become tainted."

So far, the governor said he's making more progress with the Senate but is less optimistic in the House because of what he called the "line in the sand" drawn on the first day of the session.

Herbert also took the opportunity to slam Lockhart's yet to be unveiled plan to replace textbooks with tablet computers in the state's classrooms, seen as launching her possible bid for governor.

"I think it's unfortunate. That same individual right now is trying to discover \$300 million in the budget for some project nobody's ever heard of," he said. Earlier in the day, the governor called it "an idea that's come out of the blue."

Lockhart told reporters at her daily availability that she has been working on the legislation for several months. "This is nothing new, other than scope," the speaker said. "Let's go big."

Lawmakers are working on their own proposal for Medicaid expansion, she said.

But Medicaid expansion may not be resolved before the 45-day session ends, the governor said, suggesting he may have to call a special session of the Legislature later this year.

"Right now, there's no appetite for full expansion that I can see. There may be appetite, and it's kind of half-hearted, to go to 100 percent," Herbert told the newspaper, referring to an expansion that would cover those whose incomes are at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level.

But some lawmakers willing to support the smaller expansion want the federal government to come up with more funding, he said, and that's probably not going to happen.

Under the Medicaid expansion available to the states under the new health care reform law, the federal government would cover nearly all the cost of covering Utahns earning up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

But should the state choose to cover only those with incomes at the poverty level, who don't qualify for subsidies under Obamacare, the federal government's share would drop to 70 percent.

The price tag for each option is \$25 million, said the governor's chief of staff, Derek Miller.

"Now you've moved from the moral argument to a financial argument," Miller said.

Herbert called the choice "common sense."

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