

No special session for Medicaid expansion alternative, governor says

By [Wendy Leonard](#) and [Lisa Riley Roche](#)

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SALT LAKE CITY — Gov. Gary Herbert announced Thursday he no longer plans to call the Utah Legislature into special session to consider his Healthy Utah alternative to Medicaid expansion.

There needs to be more time for lawmakers to hear from the public on his plan to use the \$258 million available to the state under the Affordable Care Act, he said during the taping of his monthly news conference on KUED Ch. 7.



"That's a necessity, I think, for them to understand the will of the people and to represent the people correctly. I'm concerned we cannot do that in a special session so today I am taking the special session off the table," the governor said.

Herbert unveiled how he believed the state should provide low-income Utahns with access to health insurance during the 2014 Legislature, but ran into opposition from House Speaker Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, and other Republicans.

Now that an agreement on Healthy Utah is nearly completed with the Obama administration, the governor said he is optimistic it will win approval from lawmakers during the 2015 Legislature that begins meeting in late January.

"I feel like we're on the right road," Herbert said. "I'm confident, I really am optimistic and believe by the end of the legislative session in 2015 we will have a program in place."

He isn't going to sit down with legislative leaders about Healthy Utah and other session issues until mid-November. That's after the newly elected Republicans and Democrats choose new leaders.

Lockhart, who has been seen as a challenger to Herbert in 2016, is not seeking re-election. During the last session, she unsuccessfully pushed a state-funded proposal to give health-care coverage to only the most needy Utahns.

The governor said the lengthy negotiations with the federal government left little opportunity for lawmakers to adequately review his plan and get public input before the regular session of the Legislature.

There also has to be a 30-day period to gather public comments on Healthy Utah before the deal made with the Obama administration is done. Herbert said the public supports his plan.

Healthy Utah contains what's called a "work effort" by able-bodied recipients who either don't have jobs or are underemployed. The governor said the plan will have "an appropriate balance of carrot and stick to make sure that that in fact happens."

Requiring recipients to work has been seen as a key selling point to Utah lawmakers. He said Healthy Utah is a pilot program that does not require a long-term commitment or additional funds.

The governor acknowledged Utah has lost Medicaid expansion funds available this year.

"I understand the challenge politically. I understand the challenge with our culture, our uniqueness of Utah. We have a desire to be self-determinant in how we address our own unique problems," he said. "That's what we're doing with Healthy Utah."

Also Thursday, Utah Department of Health officials told members of the Legislature's Health Reform Task Force that they are in the process of preparing a letter of agreement on Healthy Utah.

The agreement, to be signed by both the governor and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services secretary, will set forth terms that have already been negotiated and agreed upon.

"We all know how it sometimes goes — you negotiate and then once you finish the contract, it comes back a little differently than you thought you had negotiated," said health department director David Patton.

He said the letter, a sort of memorandum of understanding, will hopefully help protect previously discussed provisions of the governor's plan.

"I feel very pleased with how negotiations have gone," Patton said.

Lawmakers raised concerns that other states, specifically Indiana, have reached roadblocks in their negotiations with the federal government. Patton said he is attempting to avoid a similar situation and keep Utah's progress on the matter intact.

Email: lisa@deseretnews.com

Twitter: DNewsPolitics