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Former speaker intends to push Utah health reform forward

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Former speaker intends to push Utah health reform forward

Joe Pyrah - Daily Herald Daily Herald | Posted: Thursday, November 11, 2010 12:40 am | (2) Comments

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For the better part of three years, Rep. David Clark has used his energy and clout to hammer home health care reform in the state.

But Clark recently lost his position as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Can Utah's reform -- already lauded by a number of other states -- continue to move forward without Clark in a powerful position?

"It's my intent to certainly keep that ball rolling," Clark, R-Santa Clara, said. "Both the House and the Senate, as well as the governor's office, have been fully engaged in this."

The state's online exchange for small businesses to find insurance carriers is being studied by a number of states, including Texas, Clark said, calling it a market approach versus a government approach.

Rep. Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, defeated Clark for the speaker's seat and struck a neutral tone.

"I'm supportive of where we've gone thus far," Lockhart said, though she acknowledged that there is some grumbling about things like how potential insurance users are rated through the exchange system.

"You do have to take it step by step and be careful about the unintended consequences," she said.

Some lawmakers are also unhappy with the fact that insurers are required to offer certain plans, which they don't see as a true market approach.

Clark counters that there are some requirements, but insurers have come in with dozens of alternative offers that are also being used. He'll also push for the Legislature's health reform task force to be renewed for several more years. It is currently only funded until July 2011.

Judi Hilman with the Utah Health Policy Project said Clark losing the speaker's chair might even be for the best when it comes to health reform.

"You usually don't have someone that prominent, because health reform is a such complex, multilayered undertaking," Hilman said.

Without the distractions of being speaker, Clark could instead focus solely on health care, she said.

It's an experience that Sen. John Valentine has already gone through. He said he could have found a seat in the back row and been bitter about losing his spot as Senate president in 2008. Instead, he picked a few tough issues and dug in. Valentine has carried ethics and alcohol reform over the past two years, two of the stickiest issues at the Capitol.

"When you're president or speaker, you're trying to manage a lot of different moving parts," he said. "Now you can have a major impact on really hard policy decisions because you know how it really needs to be done."

Where ethics and alcohol may be tricky socially, health care reform is more complex than other issues. Clark himself said even with a career as a banker and his time in politics, he's never seen anything like it.

"This is all of those issues times a hundred," he said.

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