

Local Democrats seek support for drug plan

BY DAN WEST
STAFF WRITER

State Democrats, including State Rep. Aldo Vagnozzi (D-Farmington Hills), are trying to recruit public support in a campaign that's being billed as a war against the pharmaceutical industry.

Senior citizens - some of whom have to decide between food and needed prescriptions with their limited income - continue to beg lawmakers for help in dealing with their ever-escalating prescription drug and health insurance bills. At a town hall meeting in Southfield Wednesday, State Rep. Paul Condino called their struggle the state's and nation's most important domestic issue. About a dozen seniors attended Monday's meeting.

"This is not only an attempt to reduce costs for seniors, but this is a serious attack on the pharmaceutical industry - the most profitable industry in the world," said Condino, a former Southfield city councilman.

Condino and colleague Vagnozzi met with local seniors at the Southfield Civic Center on Monday to pitch Vagnozzi's plan to combine all of Michigan's and the Midwest's prescription purchases and direct them to Canada where these drugs are as much as 50 percent less.

Even if such a law was approved the state legislature, the lawmakers acknowledged there are other possible bureaucratic struggles. They would have to see if the law meets Federal Drug Administration laws that regulate cross-border trade.

Also, some U.S. drug companies may boycott shipping products to Canada to circumvent such a law.

Southfield retiree Irv Ray attended Monday's forum hoping to find a solution to his skyrocketing health insurance costs. Over the past 10 years, Ray said his annual co-pay for health insurance has climbed



State Rep. Aldo Vagnozzi, D-Farmington Hills, talks with Southfield residents Joan Kestivo and Irving Ray at Monday's town hall meeting.

from \$300 to \$1,500, and his prescription drug co-pay for brand name drugs has climbed from \$10 to \$20 each.

"I'm in the middle of a drug cost dilemma, and I have it better than many other seniors I know," Ray said. "I have a health insurance policy from my former employer, but they keep chipping away at it each year."

Vagnozzi's bill, introduced in January, is being reviewed by the House Health Policy Committee.

Southfield was the third in Vagnozzi's tour through Michigan's largest cities to pitch his plan. He plans to visit at least 10 towns to recruit statewide support of his plan. Democrats, like Vagnozzi and Condino, are in the minority party which is

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Aldo Vagnozzi
state representative

bumping heads with the Republican majority on policies to provide prescription drug cost relief.

"I'm shocked by some of the bills people pay," Vagnozzi said. "We want testimony and letters from people. We want to hear how they're struggling so we can convince people in Lansing."

"People shouldn't have to travel across the border to find affordable prescription drugs."

State government, Condino said, must find a way to help the estimated 1.4 million Michiganders who have little or no insurance assistance to pay for needed prescription drugs that cost "unconscionable" rates.

"We believe there is something we can do," Condino said. "This is about people's lives, yet there is no compassion or warmth by the pharmaceutical industry to come up with more fair pricing."

Condino and Vagnozzi said their efforts to find prescription drug relief will go beyond Lansing. They plan to lobby federal lawmakers in Washington with their ideas.

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