

Cantwell at odds with Democrats over energy plan

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WASHINGTON - Democrats took to the Senate floor last week to complain that a Republican senator was blocking a plan to help rescue thousands of home from foreclosure.

"We have 8,400 people every day filing for foreclosure. That ought to alarm everybody," said Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn. "We have been able to put together a major proposal that addresses this issue, and yet as we stand here, I am stymied because one senator has decided this bill is not going to go forward."

Dodd was referring to Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., who wants to add a \$6 billion package of tax breaks for renewable energy producers. The tax incentives have bipartisan backing, but many Democrats oppose including them in the housing bill because they are not balanced by tax hikes to prevent an increase in the deficit.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Ensign's amendment would raise objections in the House, where it is likely to be removed.

"Why would we want to send something to the House and have them send it back to us?" Reid asked. "With thousands of American families losing their homes every day ... it is important we act quickly."

Notably absent from the chorus of Democratic critics was Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash.

"I actually applaud the senator from Nevada in trying to move this amendment onto this bill," Cantwell said in a floor speech. "I say that knowing some of my colleagues on this side of the aisle are frustrated, but the American people are frustrated with the high costs of energy. They want us to be doing all we can to try to help alleviate those energy bills that are going to be affecting them not just this summer but next winter as they see higher home heating bills."

Cantwell and Ensign co-sponsored the energy measure this spring, and they have been looking to attach it to any legislation likely to become law.

Cantwell, who rarely breaks from Reid and the Democratic leadership, said the energy measure was important enough to risk the wrath of her Democratic colleagues. Democrats and many Republicans were pushing for quick approval of the housing bill, which would allow the government to back \$300 billion in new, cheaper mortgages for debt-ridden homeowners facing foreclosure.

"If we want to be true to our consumers' anxiety about the high cost of energy they are seeing - not only in gasoline but what they think is coming ahead - then we need to move" the housing and energy legislation together, Cantwell said. "We need to stop holding up good energy legislation while we are trying to use it to get other legislation."

Ultimately, Cantwell's arguments did not prevail. The stalemate over the energy plan led Reid to delay a vote on the housing bill until after lawmakers return from a July 4th break.

Cantwell's spokeswoman, Ciaran Clayton, said Cantwell remains hopeful the housing and energy bills can be revived, whether separately or as stand-alone bills. Both measures have broad bipartisan support among lawmakers eager to enact election-year aid for distressed borrowers in tough economic times and create incentives for alternative energy sources such as wind and solar power at a time of a \$4-a-gallon gasoline prices.

Asked whether Cantwell believes the measures should be separated - as most Democrats want - or tied together, Clayton said Cantwell had no preference.

"Her answer is, it would be whatever vehicle would move and get passed," Clayton said. "Her thought process is, this is cumulative. This will send more money into the economy and create more jobs, and however you can do it, you ought to do it."

Tory Mazzola, a spokesman for Ensign, said other Democrats should take a cue from Cantwell and push for the renewable energy tax credits. The measure would continue clean energy credits that are scheduled to expire at the end of the year, including credits for homeowners who install energy-saving appliances such as solar heating.

"It's time to forget whether you are a Democrat or a Republican and do what you think is best for the country," Mazzola said. "The question is, do we want to encourage renewable energy in this country? The Senate has already spoken, so why don't we add this to the housing bill?"

Mazzola was referring to a 88-8 vote in April in favor of adding the energy credits to the housing bill. The vote was taken before the House voted to strip out the energy provision from the housing measure.

Mazzola called it hypocritical for House Democrats to oppose the energy provision, since the House version of the housing bill includes more than \$2 billion in other tax credits that are not fully paid for.

Dodd, chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, is chief Senate sponsor of the housing measure. He and other Democrats support Ensign's energy plan but say it should wait.

"He's put in jeopardy a bill that could make a difference," Dodd said.

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