

[Watt knocks GOP's plans for Medicare and Medicaid](#) (Charlotte Observer – April 20, 2011)

By David Perlmutter

With Congress off this week, U.S. Rep. **Mel Watt** spent Monday in Salisbury talking to a high school civics class about how government works in Washington, D.C. Tuesday, the Charlotte Democrat delivered a civics lesson to a group of Charlotte seniors on issues they squarely faced: the fate of Medicare and Medicaid, Social Security and other health benefits signed into law last year that could be gutted by the new Congress. Under the budget proposed by Republicans for fiscal year 2012, Watt said Medicare would be "reduced" to a voucher program, with seniors given a voucher to see their doctor. "If that voucher runs out in March, or August or September, for the rest of that year you would be on your own,"

Watt

said. "I don't think that's fair and I don't think it's consistent with the promises we made to seniors for the Medicare program." Likewise, the Republican proposal would turn the Medicaid program into block grants to each state. Once that money ran out,

Watt

said, the states would have to foot the rest of the tab, or be forced to cut services. "The problem now is that states don't have money to provide supplements that they're already providing under Medicaid,"

Watt

said. "I don't think that is consistent to the commitments we have made ... to poor people under the Medicaid program." He wanted the seniors to understand the benefits seniors gained from the recently approved health care law. They include reducing prescription drug costs and providing free yearly physicals and preventive services such as colonoscopies and mammograms. It also extends the Medicare Trust Fund by 12 years, provides nursing home residents more protection from abuse and helps seniors remain in their homes. "There are proposals that would do away with some of the health benefits that we just put in there,"

Watt

said. "This is not a done deal, so I don't want you to get alarmed." Conor Sweeney, spokesman for Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., architect of the GOP proposal as the House budget committee chair, said

Watt's

charges are false and a part of tactics by Democrats to scare seniors. President Barack Obama's plan to preserve Medicare, Sweeney said, would ration care for current seniors, and bankrupt the program for younger Americans. He said the Republican plan would preserve the current Medicare program for seniors receiving it, or within 10 years of qualifying. Americans now under 55 would eventually be enrolled in private, government-approved health insurance plans bought mostly with government payments. It "protects and preserves Medicare - with no disruptions - for those in and near retirement, and provides those now under 55 with a

strengthened, personalized Medicare program they can count on when they retire," Sweeney said. Republicans say the Medicaid reform would "end the misguided one-size-fits-all approach that has tied the hands of so many state governments." Republican Rep. Sue Myrick of Charlotte, who supports the Ryan plan, said "we can no longer leave (Medicare and Medicaid) untouched. To do so would ignore the fact that these programs are on an unsustainable path." Much of the Republican plan is geared to cut federal spending. But

Watt

said it shouldn't be done "on the backs of seniors ... middle-income people and people who are the most vulnerable in our society."

Watt

targeted seniors in Charlotte on Tuesday and Winston-Salem and High Point this week, because of the proposed budget cuts - some that he said are "gaining traction." "I don't want to dwell on it, because I don't think a lot of these proposals are actually going to happen,"

Watt

told the group. "But they're in the news. You, as seniors, are worried about them and I want you to understand that sometimes you need to speak up to your elected representatives and tell them this is not acceptable."