

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Lawmakers want ban on texting while driving

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remedies to solve this issue. But simply passing a law will not change behavior. We also need to educate new and experienced drivers on the dangers of taking their eyes off the road and hands off the wheel."

The Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety agencies, said it does not doubt the dangers of texting and driving but does not support a ban because it would be difficult to enforce.

"Highway safety laws are only effective if they can be enforced and if the public believes they will be ticketed for not complying. To date, that has not been the case with many cell phone restrictions," said Vernon Betkey, the highway safety association's chairman.

The proposal follows a series of studies showing the dangers of operating handheld electronic devices while driving.

23 times the risk

In a study released earlier this week, the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found that when drivers of heavy trucks texted, their collision risk was 23 times greater than when not texting. Dialing a cell phone and using or reaching for an electronic device increased risk of collision about six times in cars and trucks.

The Virginia Tech researchers said the risks of texting generally applied to all drivers, not just truckers.

The lawmakers also cited a separate report by *Car and Driver* magazine that found that texting and driving is more dangerous than drunken driving.

Texting has grown from nearly 10 billion messages a month in December 2005 to more than 110 billion in December 2008, according to CTIA, the cellular phone industry's trade group.

The legislation would require states to ban texting or e-mailing while operating a moving vehicle or lose 25 percent of their annual federal highway funding. It would be patterned after the way Congress required states to adopt a national drunken driving ban.

The transportation secretary would be required to issue guidelines within six months of the measure becoming law, and states then would have two years to approve the bans on texting and driving.

States could recover highway funds by passing the legislation following the two-year period.

The bill would target the activity in a moving vehicle and not prohibit a driver from texting or e-mailing in a stopped car. ■

Villar ready to debate after November 30

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son in the next few months," Villar said, noting that political mudslinging will intensify as election nears.

Villar took note of doubts on whether Mrs. Arroyo would make good her statement in her State of the Nation Address (SONA), that she would just finish her term because of her low credibility.

Villar said it is up to the people to decide whether they will believe the President regarding the rosy statistics she gave about her nine-year performance.

"To be fair with her, since we did not go into recession, she has done something. The OFW remittances greatly helped in the resilience of the economy," Villar said.

He commended Mrs. Arroyo for handling the economy fairly but it is not sufficient to address poverty.

Villar merely laughed off the President's swipes against her critics, who included former House speaker Jose de Venecia, ex-President Fidel Ramos, ex-President Joseph Estrada and presidential aspirant Sen. Manuel Roxas.

"That's part of human conduct, to get back if one is al-

ready piqued or fed up," Villar said, adding that it's her last attempt to hit back at them.

Sen. Joker Arroyo shared Villar's concern, adding that her critics have been hitting her left and right for the past several years.

"It's just now that the President hit back," Arroyo said.

Vice President Noli de Castro said the President made clear her intentions not to prolong her stay in power beyond 2010.

He said he too would step down after his term ends on June 30 next year.

Sen. Loren Legarda said "there's no point in analyzing to death that part of the SONA on whether President Arroyo would indeed step down from office in 2010."

"After all, she can say one thing and do the exact opposite like she did in 2004 when she turned her back on her pledge not to run for President then," Legarda said.

Legarda stressed that the President must step down after her term.

"No ifs, no buts, she has to step down from the presidency next year," Legarda added.

Sen. Roxas said Mrs. Arroyo

should go as mandated by law on June 30 next year.

"By law her term ends on June 30—she's done. Let's not focus on that, but on our future so we will succeed," Roxas said.

Critics believe GMA will run for Congress

University of the Philippines sociology professor Randy David, who vowed to challenge Mrs. Arroyo if she runs for a congressional seat in Pampanga's second district, said that she failed to declare in her SONA that she will not run for Congress in next year's elections.

David said that the President did not categorically state that she would retire from government after her term ends in 2010.

He challenged Mrs. Arroyo to engage in a public debate with him in the towns of the second district of Pampanga in case they both run for Congress.

"I am not thinking about the (financial) cost of running. No one can match the resources she can have at her disposal. I don't have such resources, but I don't believe in that kind of politics, patronage politics that buys people and their votes," he said. ■

Health care progress reported in Congress

Blue Dogs reach agreement with House leadership and the White House

RALEIGH, N.C.—After weeks of turmoil, House Democrats reached a shaky peace with the party's rebellious rank-and-file conservatives Wednesday and cleared the way for a vote in September on sweeping US health care legislation.

Bipartisan Senate negotiators reported progress, too, on a bill said to extend coverage to 95 percent of all Americans without raising federal deficits.

"We're on the edge, we're almost there," said Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, the senior Republican involved in the secretive talks, although a fellow party participant, Sen. Mike Enzi, dis-sented strongly.

Sen. Max Baucus, a Democrat and chairman of the Finance Committee, said preliminary estimates from congressional budget experts showed the cost of the emerging Senate plan was below \$900 billion and would result in an increase in employer-sponsored insurance—conclusions that may reassure critics who fear a bloated bill that prompts businesses to abandon the coverage they currently provide.

In the House, Democratic leaders gave in—at least temporarily—to numerous demands from rank-and-file rebels, so-called Blue Dogs from the conservative wing of the party who had been blocking the bill's passage in the last of three committees.

The House changes, which drew immediate opposition from liberals in the chamber, would reduce the federal subsidies designed to help lower-income families afford insurance, exempt additional businesses from a requirement to offer insurance to their workers and change the terms of a government insurance option.

At their core, both the House bill and the plan under negotiation in the Senate are designed to meet President Barack Obama's goals of spreading health coverage to millions who now lack it, while slowing the skyrocketing growth in health care costs nationally.

Obama has placed the issue atop his domestic agenda, and as recently as two weeks ago was pressing the House and Senate insistently to pass separate bills by the end of July or early August.

The United States is the only

developed nation that does not have a comprehensive national health care plan for all its citizens, and Obama campaigned on a promise to offer affordable health care to all Americans. However, the recession and a deepening budget deficit have made it difficult to win support for costly new programs.

About 50 million of America's 300 million people are without health insurance. The government provides coverage for the poor, elderly, military veterans and many children, but most Americans rely on private insurance, usually received through their employers. However, not all employers provide insurance and not everyone can afford to buy it. With unemployment rising, many Americans are losing their health insurance when they lose their jobs.

The White House issued a statement praising the development in the House, and with appearances in the states of North Carolina and Virginia, the president sought to minimize the significance of the slippage in his timetable.

"We did give them a deadline, and sort of we missed that deadline. But that's OK," Obama said. "We don't want to just do it quickly, we want to do it right."

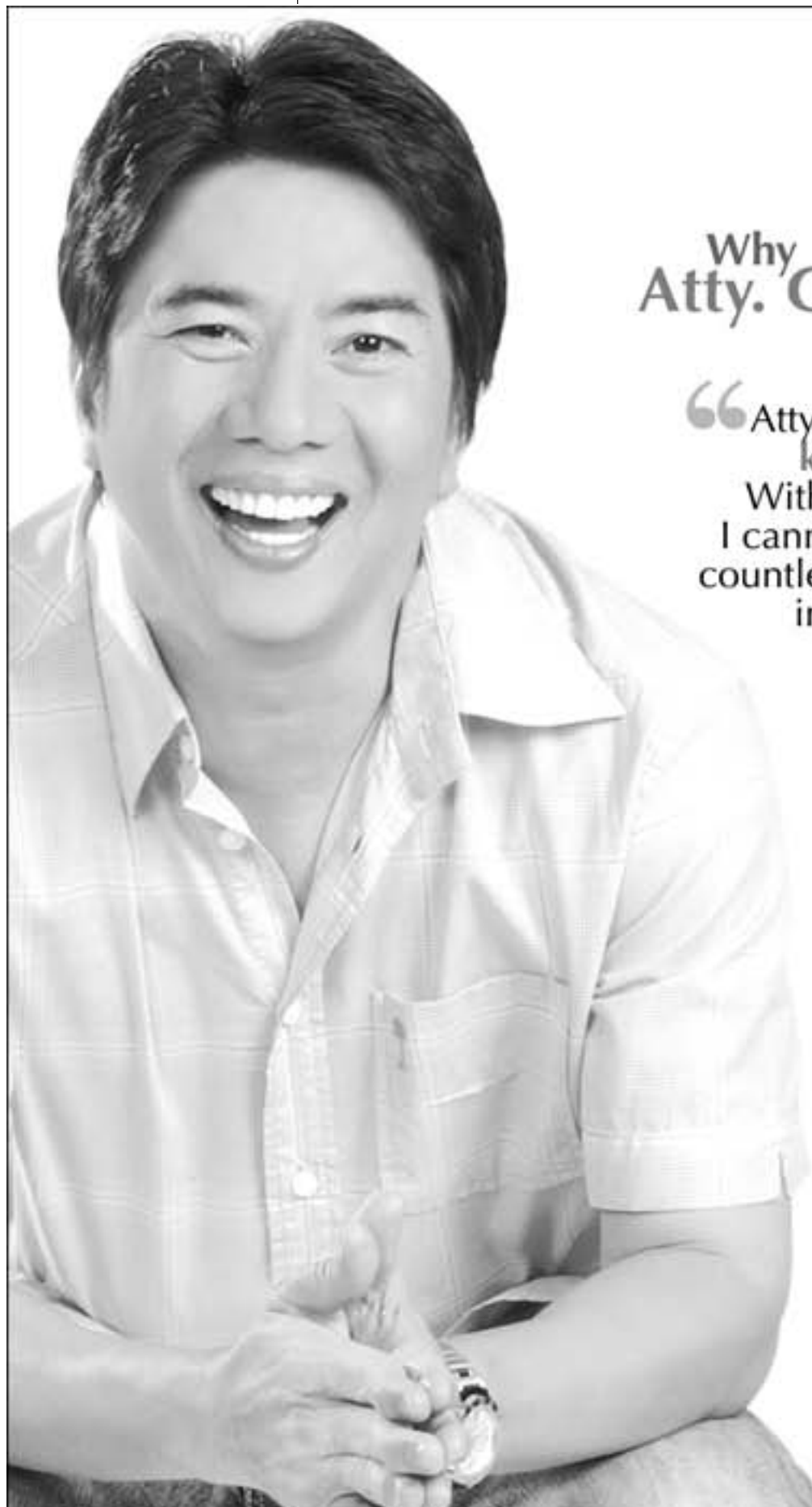
Rep. Mike Ross, a leader of conservative and moderate Democrats, said the changes agreed to by the leadership would cut the cost of the House bill by about \$100 billion over 10 years.

While Baucus reported the Senate Finance measure carried a price tag of under \$1 trillion, congressional officials said it included only the cost of the first year of a 10-year, \$245 billion program to increase doctor fees under Medicare. House Democrats used a similar sleight of hand, excluding the entire \$245 billion when claiming their measure wouldn't add to the deficit.

The House deal was worked out over hours of talks that involved not only Democratic leaders but also White House officials eager to advance the bill. Senior congressional aides cast it as a temporary deal, saying leaders had not committed to support it once the bill advances to the floor of the House.

In the Senate, Baucus, Grassley and two other senators from each party have been negotiating for weeks in hopes of agreeing

on compromise legislation. Both men face considerable pressure from their respective parties—Baucus not to stray too far from Democratic objectives, Grassley not to hand the president a political victory. (AP)



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New York details big bonuses at bailed-out banks

NEW YORK—Citigroup Inc., one of the biggest recipients of US government bailout money, gave employees \$5.33 billion in bonuses for 2008, New York's attorney general said Thursday in a report detailing the payouts by nine big banks.

The report from Attorney General Andrew Cuomo's office focused on 2008 bonuses paid to the initial nine banks that received loans under the government's Troubled Asset Relief Program last fall. Cuomo has joined other government officials in criticizing the banks for paying out big bonuses while accepting taxpayer money.

Cuomo's office found that the companies, which also included Bank of America Corp., Merrill Lynch & Co., JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Goldman Sachs Group Inc., awarded nearly 4,800 million-dollar-plus bonuses, with much of the money going to Wall Street investment bankers.

Citigroup, which is now one-third owned by the US government as a result of the bailout, gave 738 of its employees bonuses of at least \$1 million, even after it lost \$18.7 billion during the year, Cuomo's office said.

The New York-based bank received \$45 billion in government money and guarantees to protect it against hundreds of billions of dollars on potential losses from risky investments.

"There is no clear rhyme or reason to the way banks compensate and reward their employees," Cuomo said in the report, noting banks have not in recent years actually tied pay to performance as they claim when describing their compensation programs. Cuomo added that when banks' performance deteriorated significantly, "they were bailed out by taxpayers and their employees were still paid well." (AP)

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