

[By Jason Starr](#)

Congressman Peter Welch was in Burlington on Monday ostensibly to encourage elders to take advantage of Medicare's open enrollment period and re-evaluate their health care coverage. But no current discussion of Medicare is complete without addressing Congressional negotiations that could cut the senior health care program's budget. And no Congressional press conference is complete these days without questions arising about ongoing negotiations aimed at reducing the federal government's budget deficit and long-term debt.

Such was the case with Welch's visit to the top floor of the Cathedral Square Senior Living facility on Cherry Street. In a room overlooking Lake Champlain and the Adirondack peaks, Welch offered a snapshot of where negotiations stood and his opinion of where they are headed.

"A deal will be very difficult before the end of the year," he said.

Tax cuts enacted under President George W. Bush are set to expire on Dec. 31. Rep. Welch, a Democrat entering his fourth term, predicted Congress would in early January vote to re-install Bush's tax cuts for Americans who don't earn in the top 2 percent of incomes. The scenario would involve the government going over the so-called "fiscal cliff," but Welch takes issue with that term.

"This is not a cliff," he said. "That's a term that at this point is making things more confusing."

He described the current negotiating position of Ohio Rep. John Boehner, the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, as untenable. Boehner is being forced to ask conservative members of his party to do the opposite of what they said they would do during their campaigns for election — that is vote to increase taxes as part of a deficit-reduction deal that includes spending cuts. After the Dec. 31 expiration of Bush tax rates, the Republican position becomes one of cutting taxes, Welch explained, whether that's on top-two-percent earners or not.

“One hundred percent of Congress wants to extend the middle class tax cuts,” he said. “On other issues, there’s a lot of debate.”

Welch said that Democrats and President Obama have offered cuts to federal spending on Medicare and health care by reforming the system rather than cutting people’s benefits. In addition, he said, \$1.5 trillion in budget cuts have already been put in place. The goal is to achieve at least \$4 trillion in budget savings over the coming decade, Welch said.

Greg Marchildon, the Vermont director of the Association of American Retired Persons (AARP), attended the event to lobby for protecting Medicare. Congress should resist calls to increase the eligible retirement age from 65 to 67, he said, and any changes to Medicare should be “phased in gradually so future beneficiaries can plan for changes.”

“Some want to cram changes in Medicare and Social Security into a last-minute deal,” Marchildon said. “These benefits are really on the table right now. Fortunately, we have leaders who are very supportive on these issues ... These programs are programs that people have paid into their entire lives. They need to be there for us when we retire.”

Medicare annually conducts beneficiary outreach to alert seniors to the open enrollment period. Seniors have until Friday, Dec. 7, to make changes in the Medicare coverage. After that deadline, benefits are set for another year. About 20 residents of the Cathedral Square apartment building attended the event.

“It’s decision time,” Welch told them. “It’s time to review your medical situation and the plans that are available in Medicare and decide what’s right for you.”

Help for seniors regarding Medicare benefits is available by calling 1-800-642-5119 or 1-800-633-4227. Help online is available at www.medicare.gov .