

Ryan Campaigns for Fiscal Fitness

By [Steven T. Dennis](#)

Roll Call

June 25, 2008

The fiscal tsunami that looms as the baby boom generation retires gets a lot of lip service on both sides of the aisle, but one Member is putting forward a detailed plan to address it head on: Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), the ranking member on the Budget Committee.

Ryan wishes he wasn't occupying such lonely territory. His 70-page, detail-laden opus hasn't exactly gotten ringing endorsements from many fellow House Members or leadership — and likely won't — given the political pain it would inflict by implementing a higher retirement age, partial privatization of Medicare and Social Security, means testing and stiff spending caps.

"These are things that everybody calls the third rail, but we don't have a choice anymore," Ryan said. "We can't stigmatize this stuff anymore."

The Congressional Budget Office calls Ryan's fiscal blueprint sustainable, which is a good sight better than the existing path to a \$50 trillion debt. He also includes a grab bag of conservative policy proposals, such as an optional two-rate income tax eschewing most deductions and capped at 25 percent, which have been embraced by leadership, and a plan to replace the corporate income tax with an 8.5 percent business consumption tax that would also be levied on imports.

Ryan said his pitch is less about his particular proposals than the need for Members of each party to start putting plans on the table. Delay, he said, only makes the choices more difficult.

"The problem is nobody is talking about the problem," Ryan said. "Nobody on the Hill, none of the presidential candidates, no one in the media. We are growing these programs into extinction."

In a Congress obsessed with gas prices and the faltering economy, the deficit has taken a back seat. To the extent that spending has gotten much play, it has been in the context of earmarks and pork, which amount to less than 1 percent of the budget.

Democratic leadership has effectively set aside their pay-as-you-go budget rules and embraced hundreds of billions in new deficit spending and tax cuts without offsets in the face of GOP and Senate opposition.

But a few Members on each side of the aisle are keeping up the deficit hawk drumbeat — notably Reps. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.) and Frank Wolf (R-Va.), who have pushed a fiscal commission that was the subject of a hearing Tuesday.

Cooper said he hadn't read Ryan's plan but applauded him for putting one out there. But Cooper said Congress needed the kind of diagnosis a commission would provide before going for a cure.

Ryan isn't a fan of the commission approach.

"I just want to do my job," he said. "That's what people sent me here to do."

Ryan said he isn't worried about someone attacking him for his proposals to restrain Social Security and Medicare spending.

"I'd rather lose trying to do this than duck my head and go along to get along just to be called Congressman," Ryan said. But he added that he has received a good reception in town hall meetings in his district, which he describes as rich in Reagan Democrats.

"The people are ahead of us on this," he said. "You can't wait another four years. The numbers are just that bad."

Ryan pitched his plan to Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, during the candidate's recent visit to Wisconsin and has received positive feedback from a variety of deficit hawks.

"I talked to Ross Perot," Ryan said. "He loved my charts."

Maya MacGuineas, president of Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, had high praise. "Comparing it to the current path we are on, it is a vast improvement, and comparing it to the other Congressional plans out there, well, there are none."

Ryan said he wants the public and the press to hold candidates accountable on how they would address the problem.

"I'm not trying to get an award from the Cato Institute for this. That's easy to do," he said. "I'm putting a plan on the table to invite more people to do the same."

And Ryan said he refuses to listen to criticism about putting out a tough-medicine plan in an election year.

"It's an election year every other year and nothing big gets done," he said.