

Spratt should hold forum

Spratt owes it to constituents to hold a public forum, but it must be civil.

The Herald

We wish Rep. John Spratt a speedy recovery from his recent foot surgery and hope he is well enough to hold a public forum on health care reform in the near future.

As South Carolina's longest-serving congressman and chairman of the powerful House Budget Committee, Spratt can offer valuable insight into the issue of health care reform. He is certain to be at the center of the debate as the House works to bring a bill to the floor for a vote.

Spratt, one of the co-authors of the budget for fiscal year 2009 and a prominent deficit hawk, also would be able to offer a comprehensive overview of the potential economic impact of various health care proposals. And, of course, he could comment specifically on the effect such reforms might have on South Carolina and its residents.

A public forum or town hall meeting also would give Spratt a chance to hear the concerns of constituents, answer their questions and clear up some of the myriad misconceptions floating around regarding the reform effort. A civil town hall gathering might be educational for both the congressman and those who attend.

As in districts across the nation, the residents of South Carolina's 5th District, which encompasses York, Chester and Lancaster counties, have been clamoring for a public forum. And as their representative, Spratt — health permitting — owes them the opportunity to share their views and listen to his on this important topic.

Let's not pretend, however, that all those urging Spratt to hold a forum are looking for a polite discussion. At least some, we suspect, would like nothing better than to disrupt the forum and use it as a platform to protest any and all health care reforms.

It is well documented that many protesters who have shown up at forums around the nation are following the playbook of wealthy lobbyists who urge them to shout down speakers and incite those around them to do the same. In some cases, the forums have come to resemble angry mob scenes.

Not all those who oppose some or all of the reform proposals being debated in the House and Senate are doing the bidding of lobbyists. Many have honest differences with the plan as it has evolved so far, and many no doubt would welcome a chance to ask Spratt questions about the issues and where he stands.

He undoubtedly would welcome such an exchange. Those who accuse Spratt of ducking his critics are either new to the district or haven't paid much attention to his longstanding record of frequent meetings with constituents and attendance at public events of all kinds throughout the district.

In fact, Spratt was a member of a panel that held a forum on health care reform just last month at Rock Hill's Baxter Hood Center. Speakers from AARP and the S.C. Appleseed Legal Justice Center also were there, and those who attended were invited to ask questions and share personal stories about health care.

Spratt also has met with the S.C. Hospital Association, Blue Cross Blue Shield and various physician groups. But all these relatively low-key events took place before the health care debate reached fever pitch and disrupting forums became a national phenomenon.

Spratt, we think, should hold a forum on health care reform proposals to give residents his perspective and listen to theirs. But no representative is obligated to serve as a punching bag for rabid opponents of health care reform who have no interest in listening to other views.

We hope that when Spratt recovers from surgery and decides to hold a town hall, those who attend will keep it civil.