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Kansas lawmakers cautious on Social Security, with an eye on constituents

By SAM HANANEL, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON - More than 1,500 letters and e-mails have poured into Rep. Todd Tiahrt's office since President Bush presented his plan to add personal investment accounts to Social Security.

"A majority have concerns about personal accounts, but many seem misinformed," said Chuck Knapp, a spokesman for the Republican from Wichita, Kan. "It appears they've been told things about personal retirement accounts that just aren't true."

Over at the office of Rep. Dennis Moore, more than 2,000 correspondences on the issue have been overwhelmingly opposed to private accounts.

"I think there's a lot of misinformation or really lack of information about what Social Security really is or what it was intended to be," said Moore, a Democrat from Overland Park, Kan., who is skeptical of private accounts. "It never was intended to be an investment. It's more like insurance."

The bulging mailbags and conflict over perceived misconceptions reflect the political heat lawmakers face as they tackle a volatile issue.

Bush's drive to reform Social Security is running into opposition from congressional Democrats and some Republicans who worry about the political fallout in next year's mid-term elections if they tinker with the popular government retirement program. A recent AP poll showed that just 37 percent approve of Bush's handling of Social Security.

Max Skidmore, a political science professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, said Kansas opinion on the topic appears to mirror perceptions across the country.

"Kansas voters in general are conservative and cautious and basically thoughtful," Skidmore said. "There's a tendency to be skeptical of the Bush proposals. There's a feeling that 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'"

While Bush has promised that any changes will not affect Americans 55 or older, the powerful senior lobby group AARP is working hard to derail Bush's plan for younger workers to divert up to two-thirds of their Social Security taxes into personal accounts in exchange for a reduction in their guaranteed benefit.

Skidmore said he was surprised at the audience response when he spoke at a recent forum on Social Security at the Dole Institute in Lawrence, Kan.

"It's a nonpartisan institute and it tends to bring out Republicans, and yet I would say the audience was overwhelmingly skeptical of private accounts."

The AARP's \$10 million national advertising campaign has helped generate more than 4,000 calls and e-mails to Kansas' congressional delegation, said Ernie Kutzley, advocacy director at AARP Kansas in Topeka.

About half of the contacts made through AARP's toll-free number and e-mail system were to Republican Sen. Sam Brownback, Kutzley said. On the House side, Moore received the most, with more than 500.

Brownback supports the general idea of private accounts, while Moore said he is concerned about the high cost of shifting to a new investment system; estimates of "transition" costs are as high as \$2 trillion.

With Congress in recess the next two weeks, many members will be in their districts holding town meetings and forums to gauge support for the changes. Moore, the only Democrat in Kansas' congressional delegation, said he plans to hold three town meetings on Social Security in his district over next two weeks.

Tiahrt and Rep. Jim Ryun, who are both open to the idea of private accounts, are also holding a public forums later this month. The AARP's Kutzley says his group is encouraging volunteers to attend the meetings.

"While Congress is still considering how best to approach reform, I believe it is important that all Americans realize that there is a problem with the current system," said Ryun, a Republican who represents eastern Kansas. "Making changes is never easy, but if we do not act soon, the problem will only escalate."

At Republican Sen. Pat Roberts' office, there has not been a spike in mail on Social Security, though it has been steady, said spokeswoman Sarah Little.

"Congress has a duty to address the revenue shortfall comprehensively," Roberts said. "As the president said, all proposals for change need to be considered, including personal accounts. At this juncture, it is premature to forecast a timeline."