

Cong. Frank blasts Medicare bill at local forum

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MIDDLEBORO - Speaking at a Democracy in Action forum in the Town Hall auditorium Monday night, Congressman Barney Frank said the Medicare bill recently signed into law by President Bush includes "sweeping changes" and "peculiar provisions." The sweeping changes, the longtime Democrat lawmaker said, include prescription drug coverage, which would go into effect in 2006. Provisions that include a yearly hike in premiums, a deductible, co-pays, and a "donut hole" make the term "coverage" a bit questionable, he asserted.

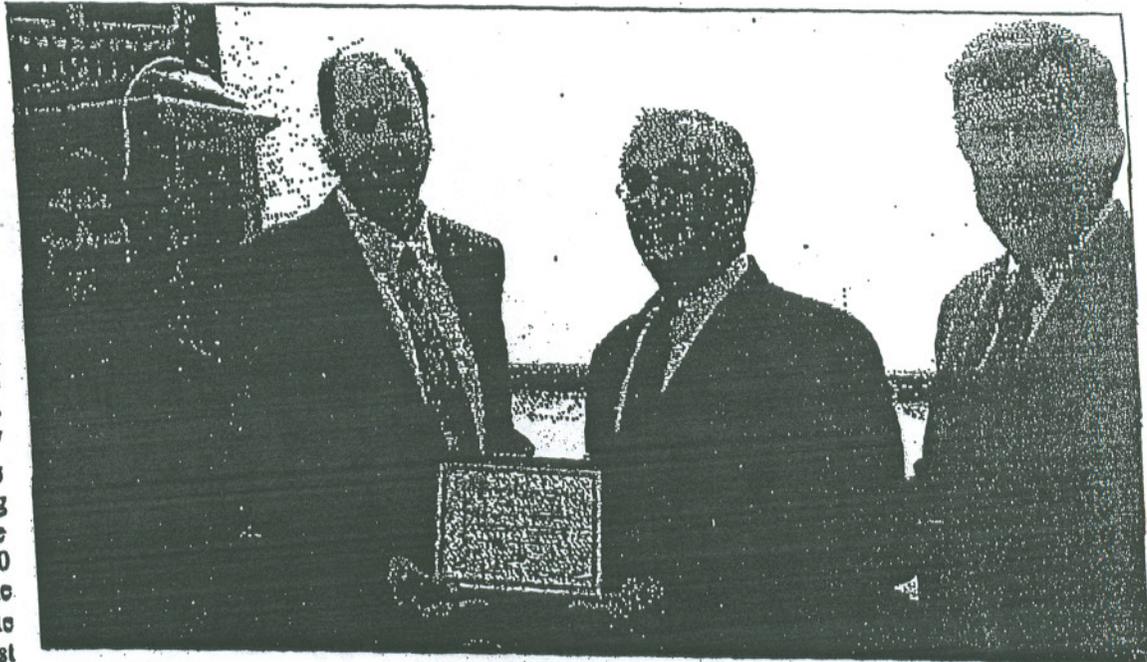
The congressman's visit was hosted by the Democracy in Action Committee, a small group of local citizens who have been sponsoring a forum series at the Middleboro Public Library since

last October. The purpose of the forum is to afford citizens the opportunity to explore recent and controversial domestic and foreign policy issues.

To further his point on problems with Medicare, Rep. Frank said that the way the bill works is that first the Medicare recipient would pay an estimated \$420 yearly premium, then a \$250 deductible, "and then this bill will cover your expenses, 80 percent of your expenses, up to \$2,250 a year." Then the government stops paying until the recipient's drug costs reach \$5,100. The coverage gap between \$2,250 and \$5,100 is being called the "donut hole." It is a way for the government to decrease the cost of the program.

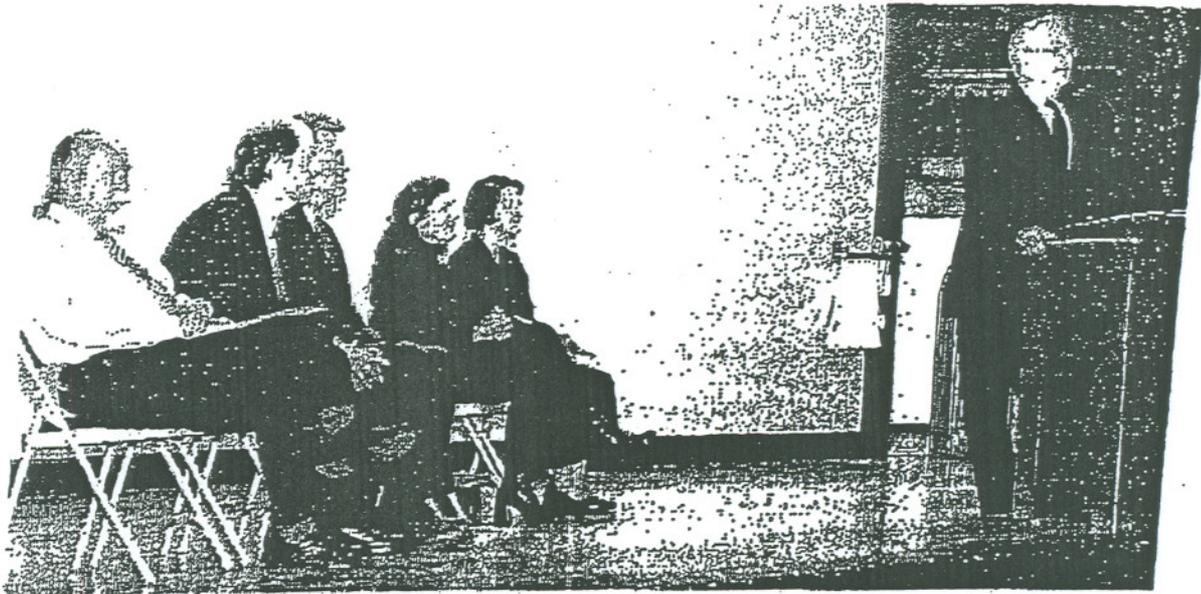
This means that if the Medicare recipient's drug bill was \$3,000 a year, the govern-

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MIDDLEBORO YOUTH ADVOCACY representatives present a citation to Congressman Barney Frank, second from right, for his support for youth programs, particularly the locally based JAIRUS Agency, during a visit to Middleboro Monday night. From left are

Tracy Desovich of the Southeast Center for Healthy Communities, who also sits on the JAIRUS board, JAIRUS director Loren Decker, Congressman Frank, and Middleboro Town Manager John Healey, a member of the MYA board. (Gazette Photo by Jane Lopes)



CONGRESSMAN BARNEY FRANK paid a visit to Middleboro Town Hall on Monday night to address the Medicare Bill passed by congress earlier this year. (Gazette Photo by Jane Lopes)

Cong. Frank . . .

ment would pay \$1,080, and the recipient would be responsible for \$1,920. If the recipient's annual drug costs were \$5,100, which is \$420 per month, the government would pay \$1,080 and the recipient would pay \$4,020. Once the recipient's drug expenses exceed \$5,100, the government picks up a larger share of the cost.

Congressman Frank said some of the other problems with the bill included an "experiment with privatization" of the Medicare system, which is being conducted as part of this bill in six metro-statistical areas. This program would enable private insurers to offer competing bids with Medicare in those six areas. Some argue that this will give seniors more options, while other argue that it will force seniors into managed care plans that they can't afford.

Another issue with the bill is that it continues to ban importing drugs from Canada or other countries.

"The argument that we are given is that drugs in Canada aren't safe, and therefore we can't allow Americans to import them," the congressman said. "My argument is the day I read about a lot of dead Canadians from taking bad pills, I'll believe that."

A third issue the congressman has with the bill is the fact that it will not allow the federal government to negotiate with drug companies in America for lower prices - even though they negotiate with lots of other companies, like airlines, because they buy in bulk.

In defense of the high cost of drugs, drug companies say that costs are so high, not because it costs so much to make the drug, but because they have to compensate themselves for the money they spent on drugs that don't make it to market. Rep. Frank said that while he understands that, he doesn't believe that the cancer patient or the patient with heart disease should

pay for that research. Instead he believes the federal government should provide pharmaceutical companies with subsidies for research, and/or better tax breaks for research.

Before Congressman Frank's Medicare presentation he received recognition from the Middleboro Youth Advocates for his "continuous support for community service for first time offenders." The JAIRUS program, led by Pastor Loren Decker, who also serves on the MYA board, works with first time offenders to help them meet their community service requirements and get their life back on track. Town manager and MYA co-chairman John Healy, who presented the certificate to Mr. Frank, noted that the program is being recognized as a model program, and that the JAIRUS program's director and founder, Pastor Decker, has received numerous requests to expand the program throughout the area and the Cape.