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The Great Health Reform Debate arrives in the Bay Area

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The passionate debate on health care reform rolled into the Bay Area this week, at times mirroring the public showdowns roiling town halls across the country.

While Democratic Congresswomen Zoe Lofgren ran into a hostile crowd on Monday night at a community meeting in Almaden Valley, she found friendlier faces outside her San Jose office on Tuesday, urging her not to waver from her support of the controversial health care effort embroiling the nation.

Not since the invasion of Iraq have lawmakers been greeted with such intense reactions from constituents, as the country contemplates an overhaul of the health care system. As legislators such as Lofgren spend the final two weeks of their congressional recess, the debate that polarized politicians in Washington is playing out in hometowns across the country.

"It's surely a good thing when we have a conversation about this important subject," Lofgren told the crowd, some holding signs that said, "No

Recess For Health Reform." Several families, some who work in high tech industries, recounted personal stories about coping with the great financial toll of private health insurance.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding out there," Lofgren said. "Thank you for raising your voices in such a civilized, thoughtful manner."

Lofgren has chosen to hold "a community call-in" on the issue later this month instead of a town hall, although she denies that's an effort to avoid confrontation.

Tuesday's rally of about 100 was organized by PACT, People Acting in Community Together, as part of a national effort by church groups to rally support for President Barack Obama's health reform plan.

But even though health care wasn't the scheduled topic at Monday night's meeting of the Almaden Valley Community Association, the topic took center stage as Lofgren faced down a skeptical and boisterous crowd.

"Vote No! Vote No! Vote No!" a group of about 300 chanted after Lofgren finished the question-and-answer session. Three clips of the meeting posted on YouTube show people challenging Lofgren about the cost of the reform and their worries that the government plan to provide health insurance for those who don't have it will include illegal immigrants. Lofgren said this is not true.

Each time they disagreed with Lofgren, the crowd groaned in unison.

"I was concerned about maintaining decorum," said Jerry Mungai, 71, vice president of the community group that meets monthly and had invited Lofgren months before. "This was a very emotionally charged

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issue. We are in the process of remaking the whole health care industry."

Mungai said he believes many of the people at the meeting were newly involved in political activism, spurred by their concerns about the health plan.

"I think the health care bill is the match that has lit a tinderbox of frustration and anger," Mungai added in an e-mail.

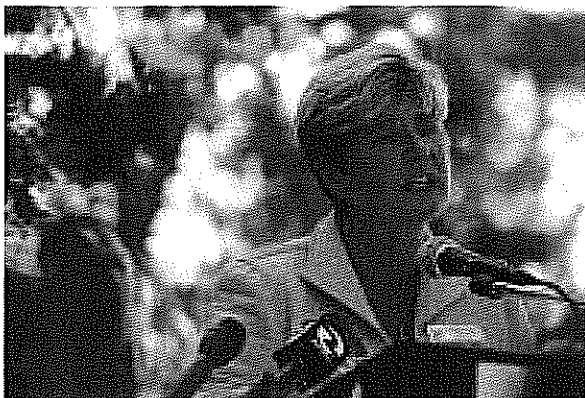
In Monterey on Monday, an estimated 600 supporters and opponents of the health reform plan packed a community auditorium where Rep. Sam Farr, D-Salinas, held a town hall. A similar crowd was expected to greet him in Santa Cruz Tuesday night.

Health care reform opponents like San Jose resident David Hockenberry said town hall tableaus show a snapshot of what many people like himself are feeling.

"This is the thinking of the real grass roots that I'm a part of," said Hockenberry, a member of Americans for Prosperity, a national group that has led some of the campaign against the reform plan.

However, legislators and supporters of the health plan have suggested that the noisy protests that met congressional delegations in their hometowns and districts are being driven by special interests groups who are orchestrating the disruptions at town halls. Those opponents, they said, have used "inflammatory rhetoric," to describe the bill.

It is a plan to "distort, disrupt and shut down dialogue," said Tim Lilienthal, a spokesman for PICO, an umbrella group of interfaith organizations. Obama has accepted the group's invitation for an Aug. 19 "call in" campaign to legislators.



Kathleen King, executive director, Santa Clara Family Health Foundation, was one of the speakers to the group of about 75 people. on Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2009. A PACT-organized protest championing the cause of affordable, mass healthcare insurance was held outside the office of Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren's San Jose field office. PACT is an acronym for People Acting in Community Together, known for its community-based activism, usually in conjunction with the faith community. (Karen T. Borchers/Mercury News) (KAREN T. BORCHERS)

In a news column, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer characterized the tactic of vocal opponents as "un-American."

"Certainly public expression of opinion is nothing new to America," countered David Spady, California director of the Americans for Prosperity. "To call that un-American is un-American."

"I'm a little bit amused," Hockenberry agreed. "These are the same people who didn't have a problem shouting down people about the war."

Monterey Herald Staff Writer Claudia Melendez Salinas contributed to this story. Contact Jessie Mangaliman at 408-920-5794.