

Politics:

In letter, Heller calls for revenue-neutral tax code, open process

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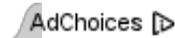
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Washington —

Sen. Dean Heller joined the list of senators making their tax reform request letters public Friday — but his wish list was pretty short, and more focused on political principles than revolutionary policies.

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In a one-page letter, Heller asked tax committee chiefs Max Baucus and Orrin Hatch that whatever new changes they make to the tax code be revenue-neutral in comparison with current law and simpler than current law, and that the reform process be carried out in the open.

That's about it.

Last month, Baucus and Hatch had asked all senators to submit letters to them by Friday suggesting legislative proposals for a totally revamped tax code. They promised a “blank slate” approach, where no provision would be sacred and all ideas would be heard, and promised senators anonymity for their proposals as a way of encouraging detailed input.

But as the deadline approached Friday, it was clear that Baucus and Hatch's plan wouldn't have quite the sweeping effect they had intended.

While some senators decided to avail themselves of the opportunity to make quiet suggestions, others, like Heller, used the moment as an opportunity to recommit themselves to positions well-formed on the 2012 campaign trail.

“The current tax code is too complex, too costly and creates unnecessary challenges,” Heller wrote in his letter.

“Our country does not have a revenue problem; it has a spending problem,” he continued in the next paragraph, asking that tax reform be “revenue-neutral for the federal government.”

“I also request that the entire process be open and transparent to the American public,” Heller said. “Our nation needs common sense legislation that fundamentally transforms the tax code without backroom deals.”

That last point is a seemingly intentional jab at the secrecy of the process Baucus and Hatch divined, in which they promised to keep senators' request letters a secret for up to 50 years.

But then again, Heller played ball to a greater extent than others, including Nevada's senior senator, Harry Reid.

Reid said Thursday that he had no intention of submitting a letter to the tax committee.

"I'm not going to be involved in this. ... I'm not going to consider it," Reid said to reporters, stressing that since he believed in the committee process, and since he wasn't on the committee, he didn't intend to play a part in the exercise.

Of course, Reid has his own ways of getting his views known in the tax committee. As majority leader, Reid has tapped Baucus to help him write a slew of major fiscal policy bills, including a little thing called health care reform legislation.

A letter between working friends like that could easily be considered a superfluous formality.



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