Schumer prescribes bipartisanship for health care debate

After GOP's repeal effort fails, Dems want seat at the table

Washington, D.C.

After seven years of promises to scrap Obamacare and a months-long push to approve a legislative replacement, Senate Republicans failed to repeal the Affordable Care Act in the wee hours of Friday morning — but in the aftermath,
Democrats were not celebrating.

"We are relieved — not for ourselves, but for the American people," Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer said on the chamber floor following the 51-49 vote.

Instead, Schumer called for bipartisan efforts to rework the health care law on which much of President Barack Obama's legacy depends.

"Every place in every corner of the country where we go, the No. 1 thing we are asked — and I know this because I’ve talked to my colleagues on the other side of the aisle — is, 'Can’t you guys work together?" he said. "Let's give it a shot."

The ball now rests in the court of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who may decide to enter negotiations with Schumer on the future of American health care. But for now, McConnell is shelving the health debate and announced that the Senate will proceed to new legislation next week.

"I regret that our efforts were not enough this time," McConnell said. "It's time to move on."

Attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act — aka Obamacare — crumbled after a surprise "no" vote from Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., on the Republicans' so-called "skinny repeal" bill around 1:30 a.m. Friday morning. The vote followed a Senate "vote-o-rama" offering several different — and all rejected — options to overturn the law.

At a Friday news conference, Schumer praised the Arizona senator for his swing vote, after dramatically returning to the Capitol on Tuesday to cast a procedural vote allowing the Senate to debate health care. McCain was diagnosed with brain cancer two weeks ago after an operation to remove a blood clot from above his left eye.

"I hope what John McCain did will be regarded in history as a turning point," Schumer said. "John McCain is blessed with an internal gyroscope of right and wrong."

The so-called "skinny repeal" was a bare-bones measure to end Obamacare's mandate
requiring individuals to have insurance and employers to provide it. McConnell resorted to it after previous attempts at legislating the downfall of Obamacare failed. The Republicans’ aim was to pass the bill and tie it to the GOP House bill that passed in May, and send the package to President Trump’s desk.

Gerald Benjamin, a veteran political scientist at SUNY New Paltz, said Schumer should be recognized for rallying all 48 Senate Democrats against the anti-Obamacare efforts.

"One of McConnell's threats to Republicans was if they don't pass the bill, 'I might have to deal with Chuck Schumer,'" Benjamin said. "But Schumer turns that around with his caucus and tells them, 'We can get there if we hang together.' It was an opportunity, and he seized it."

Although McConnell and Trump based support for the GOP package on Obamacare being in a tailspin, Democrats argued it is in fact a base upon which improvements can be built.

Rep. Paul Tonko, D-Amsterdam called the Affordable Care Act "a monumental step forward."

Nevertheless, "we already know some of the areas where it is not working well for people, and many ideas have been proposed to fix it," he said.

The GOP bill’s demise represented the last hope of Rep. John Faso, R-Kinderhook, to move his New York-specific amendment on Medicaid through the GOP-health-bill process.

The amendment, co-sponsored with Rep. Chris Collins, R-Williamsville, absolved counties from the financial burden of sharing the state's share of Medicaid costs. Faso promoted it as tax relief for upstate property owners but Gov. Andrew Cuomo estimated approval would cost the state’s end of the Medicaid program $2.3 billion.

Faso has already said he would pursue the measure as a stand-alone bill or by attaching it to another larger piece of legislation.
On Friday, Faso said in a statement that the Senate bill's failure "underscores the need for incremental, bipartisan reforms that will lower the costs of healthcare for families and individuals and put our nation's healthcare system on a path to fiscal sustainability."

Rep. Elise Stefanik's spokesman, Tom Flanigan, said she "will be speaking with her colleagues on the path forward."

Flanigin noted that the Willsboro Republican serves as co-chair of the GOP's moderate Tuesday Group, "which had a meeting recently with the New Democrat Coalition and one of the issues raised was beginning bipartisan conversations on health care."

Both Faso and Stefanik voted in favor of the GOP health care bill in the house, positions that could come back to haunt them in the 2018 election.