

## Forum offers answers to health reform

By Jennifer Shrader Staff writer

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The LaGrange-Troup County Chamber of Commerce promised a civilized discussion on health-care reform and - unlike some parts of the country - those attending a Tuesday morning forum did not show up toting guns or shouting each other down.

LaGrange cardiologist Dr. Tom Gore, Tim Sweeney of the Georgia Budget Policy Institute and Kelly McCutchen of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation gave their views on current reform measures being debated nationally and what such measures could mean for Georgians.

Gore said he'd taken an informal poll of his fellow physicians and found the group skeptical, concerned and "with questions." Up to 15 percent of local residents don't have health insurance, he said, and with unemployment rising, that number is growing. West Georgia Health System previously spent about \$1 million a month to cover medical costs for uninsured patients - a number that's recently doubled to \$2 million a month, or \$24 million annually.

"I encourage you to read all you can" on health-care reform, Gore said, adding that a "summary" of legislation he'd recently read was 45 pages long.

"Some of it gives me concern. A lot of it gives me heartburn," he said.

Gore said he'd support a plan that included money for programs like Troup Cares, the medical clinic for the uninsured he helped found, and incentives for making lifestyle changes, which the city of LaGrange offers as part of its health insurance plan.

"It's saved LaGrange \$1 million in health insurance claims a year," Gore said.

Sweeney and McCutchen said they believe some form of health-care reform will pass by the end of the year. McCutchen agreed with Gore that a program with health-care incentives would be beneficial.

"(The Senate proposal) would make those incentives illegal, but the incentives would improve health and lower costs," McCutchen said. "Don't outlaw what's working."

Sweeney said there's more agreement in Congress on new rules for insurance. Most in Washington agree that someone shouldn't be denied coverage for pre-existing conditions and that insurance should be "portable" - able to carry from job to job, or to keep if the insured loses their job.

Sweeney believes the “public option,” a government-run health-care system, won’t be included.

“If it is, it won’t pass the Senate,” he said.

— Gore, McCutchen and Sweeney took questions at the forum from chamber members and several questions were submitted in writing after the event ended. Chamber President Page Estes said the questions will be forwarded to the trio for answers, which will be put on the chamber’s Web site, [www.lagrangechamber.com](http://www.lagrangechamber.com). Anyone else who would like to submit a question may do so by e-mailing Estes at [pestes@lagrangechamber.com](mailto:pestes@lagrangechamber.com).