

Ritter's 208 Commission seeks answers

Durango meeting one of 11 to discuss health-care crisis

By Ted Holteen

Herald Staff Writer

Gov. Bill Ritter's blue-ribbon commission on health care in Colorado came to Durango on Tuesday, and before members left, the governor's staff reiterated what many already know: Solving the state's health-care crisis won't be easy.

The forum at the Double-Tree Hotel was the third of 11 similar meetings being conducted statewide this month by the 208 Commission to gauge communities' visions for what a significant health-care reform plan will include. The commission was formed in 2006 and will report its findings to the Legislature in January.

"I think the meeting was very helpful. I feel like Gov. Ritter is listening to us," said Karen Zink, a nurse practitioner and owner of Southwest Women's Health Associates. "One of the most important things that has come out of this process is education of the public and even the education of government officials about what the problems are in health care," she said.

The estimated 40 participants were each given a hand-held device on which they could respond to questions posed in a PowerPoint presentation by Chris Adams with The Adams Group, who facilitated the forum.

The questions addressed the group's opinions about the best ways to reduce health-care costs, improve access to care and improve the quality of health care.

The Primary Health Care Community Coalition has centered on the scarcity of primary care in La Plata County as its top priority in previous surveys and public meetings. The coalition formed late last year when news broke that Valley-Wide Health Systems would close its primary-care clinic in Durango in 2007.

Adams said the results for each of the individual forums won't be compiled until all 11 meetings are completed.

Tuesday's meeting gave a hint of how difficult it will be to develop a consensus to improve health care: While all attendees favored making a basic health-care benefit package available to all, those present were almost split on whether to require employers to provide health care.

The group alternated between division and consensus on other issues as well, including the creation of a law mandating health insurance for all individuals including those already eligible for existing public programs like Medicaid and Child Health Plan Plus.

Joan Henneberry, the executive director of the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing and a senior adviser to the governor, was one of three Ritter staff members in attendance.

She said Ritter asked the commission specifically to travel throughout the state before holding forums in the Denver-metro area because of the differing health-care interests between urban and rural communities.

"It's another opportunity for us to hear from people about what is most important, and we expect a robust and lively debate in the Legislature next year around those proposals," Henneberry said.

tholteen@durangoherald.com