

# Romney: Raise Eligibility Age For Medicare

BY DAVID ESPO  
AP Special Correspondent

DETROIT — Four days before critical primary elections, Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney outlined a far-reaching plan Friday to gradually delay Americans' eligibility for Medicare as well as Social Security.

Romney said the shift, as people live longer, is needed to steer the giant benefit programs toward economic sustainability.

Speaking to the Detroit Economic Club — in cavernous Ford Field, where the Detroit Lions football team plays — he also made a play for primary election support in Michigan, which votes on Tuesday along with Arizona.

Romney said previous steps to toughen government emission standards had "provided a benefit to some of the foreign automakers" at the expense of American companies. He said future changes should be worked out cooperatively between government and industry.

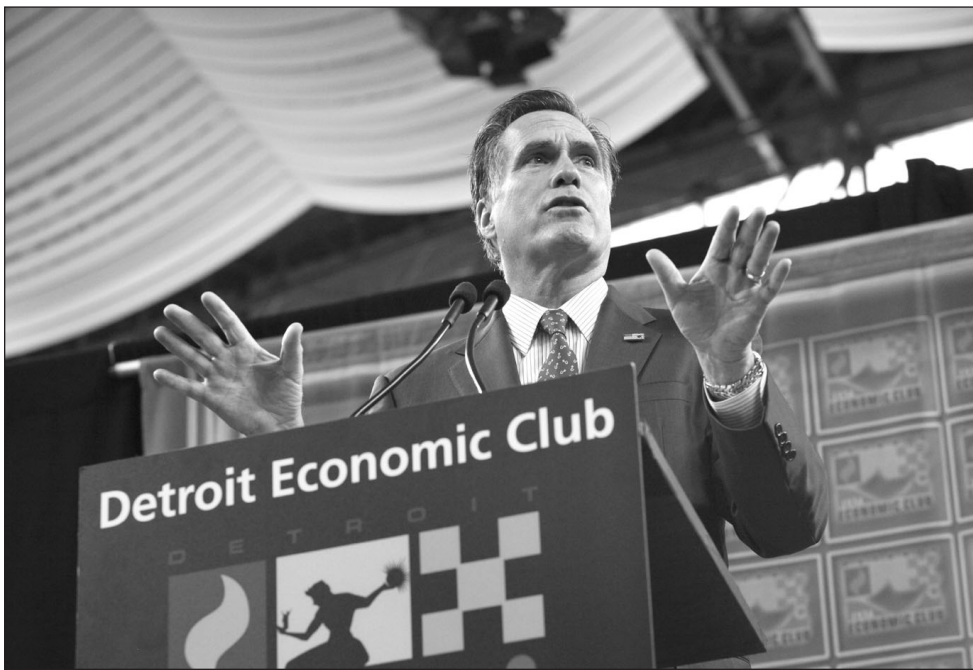
Campaigning in the city where he was born, Romney described himself as "a car guy" who has a Ford Mustang and a Chevy pickup and whose wife, Ann, drives "a couple of Cadillacs." Aides said they were model year 2007 and 2010 SRX vehicles, one each registered in Massachusetts and California.

Romney said his proposals for Medicare and Social Security would begin in 2022, meaning no current or near-retirees would be affected. He also said he favors adjustments to curtail the growth of future benefits for the relatively well-to-do, so "lower-income seniors would receive the most generous benefits." He had described his Social Security proposals previously.

The two programs provide retirement and health care benefits to tens of millions of older Americans.

Beginning in 2022, Romney said, "we will gradually increase the Medicare eligibility age by one month each year. In the long run, the eligibility ages for both programs will be indexed to longevity so that they increase only as fast as life expectancy."

Under current law, the age for collecting full Social Security benefits is gradually rising from 65 to 67. Medicare is available at age 65. In both cases, the age is set in law, and Romney's suggestion that it be tied automatically to increases in the life expectancy of Americans would mark



PATRICIA BECK/DETROIT FREE PRESS/MCT  
**Former Mass. Governor and U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney addresses the Detroit Economic Club at Ford Field in Detroit, Michigan on Friday, February 24, 2012.**

a major change.

He spoke in the run-up to a pair of primaries that mark his latest tests as he tries to break free of Rick Santorum and his other persistent but underfunded rivals in the presidential race.

He is widely expected to win Arizona. Neither he nor his rivals is airing television ads in the state, a reliable sign that all sides view it as a closed case.

Although public and private polls in Michigan show Romney has erased much or all of an earlier deficit, he still faces a stiff challenge from Santorum in the state, where the disparity in television advertising is not as overwhelmingly in Romney's favor as it has been elsewhere.

It is an unwritten rule of Michigan politics that presidential candidates appear before the Detroit Economic Club. Santorum addressed the group several days ago, and officials familiar with the details said Newt Gingrich's camp

had been in discussions for an appearance as late as last week. A spokesman for the former House speaker did not respond to a request for comment.

Romney's commitment caused a spike in interest, and as a result, the former governor spoke in the huge stadium. He stood on a makeshift stage set up on the 35-yard line, with his audience on the stadium floor ringed by thousands of empty stadium seats. Goalpost up-rights were visible above the black draping that served as his backdrop. United Auto Workers protested outside.

The event's optics were widely criticized. When asked who chose the venue, Romney's campaign pointed to a letter from the Detroit Economic Club citing the 1,200-person crowd. The club blamed security concerns for moving the event from an atrium inside the stadium complex down onto the field. The Secret Service provides Romney's security.

# 'Friends Of Syria' Vow Support For Opposition

BY MATTHEW LEE  
AND PAUL SCHEMM  
Associated Press

TUNIS, Tunisia — U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton blasted Russia and China as "despicable" for opposing U.N. Security Council action on Syria, and more than 60 nations began planning a civilian peacekeeping mission to deploy after the Damascus regime halts a brutal crackdown on the opposition.

President Barack Obama said Washington will keep pressuring Syrian President Bashar Assad to stop the "slaughter" of civilians, saying it was imperative that the world unite in condemning the Syrian military onslaught.

"It is time to stop the killing of Syrian citizens by their own government," Obama said after a conference by a group of nations known as the Friends of Syria concluded in Tunisia.

The move by the group is aimed at jolting Assad and his allies into accepting demands for a democratic transition, even as they are still unwilling to commit to military



Clinton

went on to predict a military coup inside Syria of the kind that ended the old regimes in Egypt and Tunisia.

"We saw this happen in other settings last year, I think it is going to happen in Syria," she told reporters at the end of the meeting. "We also know from many sources that there are people around Assad who are beginning to hedge their bets — they didn't sign up to slaughter people."

Assad allies Russia and China, which have blocked previous U.N. action on Syria and are eager to head off any repeat of the kind of foreign intervention that happened in Libya, gave no sign they would agree to peacekeepers. Their ac-

tions prompted a particularly strong reaction from Clinton.

"It's quite distressing to see two permanent members of the Security Council using their veto while people are being murdered — women, children, brave young men — houses are being destroyed," she said. "It is just despicable and I ask whose side are they on? They are clearly not on the side of the Syrian people."

In New York on Friday, U.N. deputy spokesman Eduardo del Buoy said the secretary-general's office had no immediate response to a call for a peacekeeping mission.

The conference, meeting for the first time as a unified bloc, called on Assad to end the violence immediately and allow humanitarian aid into areas hit by his regime's crackdown. The group pledged to boost relief shipments and set up supply depots along Syria's borders, but it was unclear how it would be distributed without government approval.

The friends, led by the U.S. and European and Arab nations, also vowed to step up ties with the Syr-

ian National Council, an opposition umbrella group. They took a tentative step toward recognition by declaring the council to be "a legitimate representative" of the Syrian people, a possible precursor to calling it "the legitimate representative."

Despite the show of unity, which diplomats said they hoped would impress upon Assad that the end of his family's four-decade autocratic rule is inevitable and at hand, there were signs of division. Some nations argued for arming Assad's foes, while others called for the creation of protected humanitarian corridors to deliver aid.

Neither idea was included in the conference's final document, which instead focused on steps nations should take to tighten the noose on the regime, including boycotting Syrian oil, imposing travel and financial sanctions on Assad's inner circle, and working with the opposition to prepare for a post-Assad Syria, including lucrative commercial deals. It also welcomed the appointment of former U.N. chief Kofi Annan to be a joint U.N.-Arab League special envoy for Syria.

# Opt-Out

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district forecasts will continue for the next five years) and their escalating costs, giving them and opt-out at this time (no matter the size) will only encourage them to come back for more. They must make significant and sustained cuts in costs with this ongoing loss of enrollment."

The mailing added: "Until they realize they have a spending problem and not a revenue problem, this current opt-out won't be the end of it. Giving them more is not the answer."

District officials vehemently disagree with that claim, and they say, because of support from the business leaders and legislative leaders of the community, that patrons can be sure the district is being as fiscally responsible as possible.

"(Their support) validates that we are trying to go about this the right way," Bietz said. "This opt-out question deals primarily with where we are going. I think it validates this opt-out that the business community, who are used to looking ahead and planning for the future, have come on board and said they agree that this is the right course. Having

the legislators approve — they had a large part to play in where we are at — is really important."

Yet, the We The People Yankton group claims in its mailing there is a huge stumbling block to being able to claim fiscal responsibility: the district's health insurance fund.

"The YSD medical reserve fund, currently at \$8,200,000, is \$800,000 more than it was last May and exceeds industry requirements by \$7,500,000," the mailing said. "By restructuring the current health plan as recommended, YSD could utilize \$8.2 million reserves each year to reduce the overall cost of the health plan for the taxpayers. ... For some reason, the administration have never used this excessive reserve fund, 85 percent of which was funded by taxpayers."

But superintendent Joseph Gertsema, says that the opposite is true, and the district has been a vigilant steward of district funds.

"The thing people are forgetting with the health insurance funds are that they are not going to go away," he said. "If we expend a certain amount of money on a commercial plan, it is gone forever. We are glad there is money in the reserve and that it is available to be used in the short term. The good news is that it is there. It is almost like

the difference between renting a house and owning a house. If you rent it, the money is gone. If you own it, you have some equity. Some people don't understand that."

In addition, he notes that the school board is proposing using funds from the health care reserves to minimize the opt-out's impact on taxpayers, while not reducing the fund to the point that it puts the district at risk if there were a high claims made on the program. Its money that would not be available to the district if it were to utilize a private insurance company, which the WTPY group claims would be more fiscally responsible.

Another charge We The People Yankton has made is that the district is not being transparent with voters.

"We remain concerned for the sustainable education of our children," the group stated. "We have actively tried to work with the school board over these last months, making financial suggestions, reviewing their spending, while being refused public records which almost every other school district in South Dakota provides."

However, Bietz says this claim is unfounded.

"The first thing I tell folks is we have always been transparent," he said. "I have never

turned away a citizen who has wanted information or a copy of the budget. ... However, we have made a more aggressive outreach to help people find the information. We have taken steps to make things more readily available to people. I think that if people are seeking information, we have made it about as easy to access as possible. But we are always willing to take suggestions."

Looking ahead Gertsema said, pass or fail, he wants to thank the people of the district.

"We want to thank the school district patrons for sharing their views about the first opt-out," he said. "As a result of the patrons talking to board members and giving input, we discovered there were about five or six points that needed to be adjusted. I am hoping that the school district patrons are seeing that the board has reacted to their points. I think as a result of that, it takes away some of the animosity as we compare the first with the second opt-out. This second opt-out is a whole different package — the amount is less, the term is less, the amount of taxes are less. "We encourage people to vote, for or against, and Tuesday night we will know the outcome."

Polls will open at 7 a.m. Tuesday and stay open until 7 p.m. with polling locations across the city.

## Report Notes Rapidly Expanding Iranian Activity

VIENNA (AP) — Iran has rapidly ramped up production of higher-grade enriched uranium over the last few months, the U.N. nuclear agency said Friday, in a confidential report that feeds concerns about how quickly the Islamic republic could produce an atomic bomb.

The International Atomic Energy Agency report also said Iran failed to give a convincing explanation about a quantity of missing uranium metal.

Diplomats say the amount unaccounted for is large enough to be used for experiments in arming a nuclear missile.

Iran insists it is not interested in nuclear weapons and says its activities are meant either to generate energy or to be used for research.

But the report contained little assurances the country's activities are purely peaceful.

Instead, it also confirmed that two IAEA missions to Tehran within less than a month had failed to dent Iran's refusal to assist an IAEA probe of suspicions the country has been secretly working on aspects of a nuclear weapons program.

The IAEA team had hoped to speak with key Iranian scientists suspected of working on the alleged weapons program, break down opposition to their plans to inspect documents related to nuclear work and secure commitments from Iranian authorities to allow future visits.

## Venezuela's Chavez Flies To Cuba For Surgery

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — President Hugo Chavez bid an emotional farewell laced with references to Jesus Christ and independence hero Simon Bolivar as he departed Venezuela on Friday for Cuba for urgent surgery to remove a tumor he says is probably malignant.

Clasping the hand of his youngest daughter, Chavez addressed allies of his socialist political movement and troops standing at attention at the Miraflores presidential palace.

"I say this from my gut: With cancer or without cancer ... come rain, thunder or lightning ... nobody can avoid a great patriotic victory Oct. 7," the president said, referring to the date of Venezuela's presidential election.

"Long live Chavez!" he cried.

The socialist president, who is seeking a fourth term, referenced Bolivar and Christ's burdens to describe his battle with cancer.

## U.S. General Urges Calm In Afghanistan

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan called on his troops to resist any urge to avenge the death of two American soldiers killed in riots over the burning of Qurans at a U.S. base, even as renewed protests Friday claimed at least seven lives.

The anti-American demonstrations by thousands of Afghans who took to the streets after midday prayers were further evidence that President Barack Obama's apology has failed to quiet the outrage over what the U.S. says was the inadvertent destruction of the holy books.

The killing of the two U.S. soldiers and the civil unrest have further strained Afghanistan's relations with the United States. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is trying to negotiate a long-term partnership agreement with the United States to govern the activities of U.S. forces in his country after 2014, when most foreign combat troops will have left or taken on support roles.

The violence against coalition troops also comes at a time when many countries contributing to the force are seeking to accelerate their withdrawal from what has become an unpopular and costly war that has dragged on for more than 10 years.

At least 20 people, including the two U.S. soldiers, have been killed in four days of violence.

## Scrutiny Pushed Palin To Exasperation

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Just a few months after returning from the presidential campaign trail, a weary Sarah Palin shot off a 1 a.m. email to top colleagues in her office.

Filmsy ethics complaints were mounting, and the Alaska governor was feeling increasingly detached from her family. She faced mounting legal bills that only exacerbated the financial turmoil related to her family's travel.

"I'm just beat down on this one. I am tired. The opponents have succeeded on the drive towards our personal bankruptcy, and have divided my family," she wrote.

She finished the overnight email with a sobering conclusion: "One has to be single, wealthy, or corrupt to function in this political system."

The relentless examination and subsequent exasperation lingered for months after Palin's stint as a vice presidential candidate in 2008, and thousands of documents released by the state this week indicate that it ultimately drove her to leave political office.

## iPhone User Awarded \$850 For Slow Service

SIMI VALLEY, Calif. (AP) — When AT&T started slowing down the data service for his iPhone, Matt Spaccarelli, an unemployed truck driver and student, took the country's largest telecommunications company to small claims court. And won.

His award: \$850.

Pro-tem Judge Russell Nadel found in favor of Spaccarelli in Ventura Superior Court in Simi Valley on Friday, saying it wasn't fair for the company to purposely slow down his iPhone, when it had sold him an "unlimited data" plan.

Spaccarelli could have many imitators. AT&T has some 17 million customers with "unlimited data" plans who can be subject to throttling. That's nearly half of its smartphone users. AT&T forbids them from consolidating their claims into a class action or taking them to a jury trial. That leaves small claims actions and arbitration.

Late last year, AT&T started slowing down data service for the top 5 percent of its smartphone subscribers with "unlimited" plans. It had warned that it would start doing so, but many subscribers have been surprised by how little data use it takes for throttling to kick in — often less than AT&T provides to those on limited or "tiered" plans.

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