Public and Press Have Right to Know

New Debt Panel Should Not Meet Behind Closed Doors

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, who authored “Sunshine Legislation” during the 2009 national health care debate, announced today he will introduce similar legislation to ensure the new bicameral super-committee will operate under the watchful eye of the public.

“Too much is at stake to allow this 12-member committee to make critical decisions about the country’s future behind closed doors,” said Buchanan, Florida’s only member of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee. “We need to make sure this new committee meets in public as they discuss how to cut $1.2 trillion over the next 10 years. The public and the press have a right to see this process unfold.”

Buchanan said his bill would mirror legislation introduced in the Senate by Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev, that would ensure that all hearings and meetings are done in a transparent manner through live television broadcasts, advanced public notification, and public attendance. Classified material would be the only exception.

“This is a pivotal point in our nation’s history,” said Buchanan. “In the past, massive legislative measures have been written in the middle-of-the-night by a handful of members and staff, and then quickly passed into law before the American people have a chance to even see what the final version looks like, let alone determine how they feel about it. This is not acceptable.”

Congressional leaders have until Aug. 16 to select a bipartisan panel of 12 members to form the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction. The committee has until Nov. 23 to report back to Congress with recommendations of at least $1.2 trillion in additional budget savings over the next 10 years.

It remains unclear what recommendations the joint committee will make, but press reports

indicate that tax reform and entitlement reform could be on the table. The committee’s final recommendation will be brought to the House and Senate for an up-or-down vote – without amendment – before Christmas.

“The State of Florida leads the nation with one of the toughest right-to-know laws in the country,” said Buchanan. “Florida’s strong Sunshine Law guards against back-room deals and secret negotiations by government officials. I urge congressional leaders to follow Florida’s lead and let sun shine on the joint committee.”

Buchanan previously sponsored a House resolution aimed at requiring all conference committee meetings on the health care reform bill be made open to the public. Buchanan’s resolution, H.Res. 847, sought to put the House on record against secret, closed-door talks among lawmakers involved with drafting the final version of the health care bill. It was co-sponsored by 172 bipartisan members of the House.