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Retirement obstacles foreseen

By Don Mecoy

Thomas Saving Speaking Tuesday at the Rotary Club of Oklahoma City, Texas A&M economist Thomas Saving sought to throw a scare into the 250 or so business folks as they polished off their salads and pork chops.

"Now I'm going to really frighten you," Saving said before unveiling a chart that showed a predicted \$77 million shortfall in federal elderly entitlement programs.

Saving, a public trustee of the Social Security and Medicare Trust Funds, has been accused of carrying water for President Bush and his plan to create private investment accounts to bail out Social Security. Saving doesn't buy into that, even though he is a senior fellow of the conservative-leaning **National Center for Policy Analysis**.

"I favored private accounts and personal accounts long before the president did," Saving said. And, he said, the administration knew about his opinion before President Clinton appointed him as a public trustee.

Saving stood in for local businesswoman Terry Neese, who was scheduled to discuss her recent appointment as director of the U.S. Mint. However, he said, the White House prefers that its nominees steer clear of microphones before confirmation. Neese attended the meeting and arranged Saving's appearance.

Saving's point is that, while there might be many disagreements about the extent of the problem, something needs to be done, and the longer it takes to reach a solution, the bigger the dilemma is going to be. It may require lower benefits and higher taxes, he said, but politicians must come up with a reasonable plan to address the problem.

"Tough it out. Do something real," he said. "What you cannot do is pass legislation that requires that you repeal the law of gravity."

An explanation of the Bush reforms is a key part of Saving's presentation, but he says that's not an endorsement of the president's platform. Proponents

and opponents disagree on how these changes would affect recipients, particularly people who are totally dependent on Social Security.

"There are a number of ways to do it," Saving said.

Despite a national road show to boost support for the Bush private accounts plan, Saving said Americans clearly aren't enthused about the concept.

"It didn't have the impact he would have liked," Saving said. The biggest stumbling block may be that many of the plan's details remain a mystery, he said.

Larkin Warner, a retired Oklahoma State University economics professor who attended Saving's presentation, said it's difficult to get people to support an overhaul of the system now to shore up things later.

"It's like telling people that they have to take care of their posterity," Warner said. "They say, 'What's my posterity ever done for me?'"