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In a meeting with retired Allegheny Ludlum steelworkers Tuesday, U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire stressed the need to strengthen Social Security and Medicare.

The senior benefits issue is of particular concern to the retirees.

Many are reeling from the contract that Ludlum workers and parent company Allegheny Technologies Inc. ratified Friday.

The retirees have said the deal hurts former workers because it includes increased monthly health insurance premiums.

Some retirees will be paying a fivefold increase for medical benefits.

Altmire spoke to about 20 members of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees at their Brackenridge union hall.

"We need to make decisions today to strengthen Social Security and Medicare," Altmire said. "Those trust funds are your money."

There are efficiencies in the two programs that can be made, but the resulting funds should strengthen the program and not be applied to deficit reduction, the McCandless Democrat said.

Historically, Social Security has brought in more money than it has paid out, and those surpluses went to fund other programs.

But now that baby boomers are beginning to qualify for Social Security, times are changing.

It'll be 25 years until Social Security goes bankrupt, Altmire said, but it'll be just six or seven years until Medicare goes bankrupt.

"The Medicare trust fund has an urgent crisis," he said.

Altmire looked back at the 2000 election when presidential candidate Al Gore presented his "lockbox" idea to stow away Social Security surpluses until needed. Just a decade ago, Gore was ridiculed for the idea, Altmire said.

Retired steelworker Tony Slomkoski said Altmire's remarks were interesting.

"(E)specially what has happened with the last contract talks," Slomkoski said, "our big concerns are Social Security and Medicare."

Proper adjustments

Some retirees perked up at Altmire's idea to change the way cost-of-living adjustments are calculated, in effect, helping seniors on Social Security.

Cost-of-living adjustments look at what goods cost for an average family, not for senior citizens, Altmire said, and seniors have different costly expenses.

For two years in a row, Social Security recipients have gotten no cost-of-living adjustments.

Altmire said he's cosponsoring a bill that would change that calculation, making sure costs for seniors -- like prescription drugs -- are factored in.

Retired steelworker Henry Eckenrod said Altmire's plan on cost-of-living adjustments is a "good point of view."

"Hopefully, it'll help us because the last few years, we got nothing (more) out of Social Security," Eckenrod said.

Altmire also decried the minimum financial threshold veterans must meet to qualify for Veterans Affairs benefits.

"You're being penalized for doing well for yourself," he said.

Most people in America are unsatisfied with how the government is running, Altmire said -- and that includes the politician, himself.

"You can count me in," he said.

Eckenrod said he's glad to see the young congressman -- Altmire is 43 -- in office. He said that older politicians views are "faded and jaded."

"I thought Congressman Altmire was right on the ball," Eckenrod said. "He's for the working man, and that's what we need."