

The Washington Post

Congress on course to avert a shutdown

Advertisement

By Lori Montgomery and Paul Kane
Washington Post Staff Writers
Sunday, February 27, 2011; 6:27 PM

The threat of a government shutdown receded Friday, as Senate Democrats tentatively embraced a Republican plan to immediately cut \$4 billion in federal spending by targeting programs that President Obama has already marked for elimination.

The GOP proposal, unveiled late Friday by House leaders, would keep the government running only until March 18 - two weeks past the current March 4 deadline - a shorter extension than Democrats are seeking. But by offering a stopgap measure that cuts only programs Obama has identified as unnecessary, Republicans appear to have broken an impasse over spending that has been brewing since they took control of the House this year.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who engineered the legislation in concert with House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), said there is now a "clear path" to averting a government shutdown on Friday. "By supporting the House bill, our friends on the other side of the aisle will have the chance to ensure that the government remains operational while we work with them to identify additional ways to shrink Washington spending this year," McConnell said.

While Senate Democrats said they would continue to press for a longer extension, they acknowledged that there was no longer a disagreement over the cuts.

"We are encouraged to hear that Republicans are abandoning their demands for extreme measures like cuts to border security, cancer research and food safety inspectors and instead moving closer to Democrats' position that we should cut government spending in a smart, responsible way that targets waste and excess while keeping our economy growing," Jon Summers, a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), said in a statement.

Lawmakers remain sharply divided over how to fund the government through Sept. 30, with Republicans demanding unprecedented reductions in domestic spending to trim a budget deficit projected to hit a record \$1.6 trillion this year. Last week, in response to public anxiety over deficit spending, the House approved a plan to cut a total of \$61 billion from virtually every federal agency over the next seven months.

Democrats reject cuts of that magnitude, arguing this would cripple critical public services, wipe out hundreds of thousands of jobs and short-circuit the economic recovery. The Democrats' case was bolstered this week by a Goldman Sachs analysis that predicted the GOP bill would reduce economic growth later this year by as much as 2 percentage points.

Both parties agree, however, that letting the standoff shut down the government would be an unpopular

move.

"They feared a government shutdown," Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said of congressional Republicans, "and so they are adopting some of our suggestions on what to cut."

A Gallup poll released Thursday suggests the public is closely divided on the question of which party is doing a better job in the effort to come to an agreement on spending, with 42 percent giving the edge to Republicans and 39 percent to Democrats. Fully 60 percent of the respondents say they want to see a compromise to avert a shutdown, even if it means passing a budget they disagree with.

The spending bill proposed Friday by House leaders would permit federal agencies to continue operating at current funding levels, except for eight programs that were marked for deep cuts or termination in the budget request Obama delivered to Capitol Hill this month.

The cuts include \$30 million for the upkeep of the Smithsonian Institution's historic Arts and Industries Building, a fund deemed unnecessary because private contributions have covered those needs. An additional \$29 million would be saved by eliminating an Agriculture Department program that helps farmers get access to high-speed Internet service. Republicans said this program has been littered with "abuses" and duplicates efforts elsewhere in the government.

The Education Department would lose \$468 million for four programs deemed duplicative or ineffective, including the Even Start family literacy program and the Striving Readers program for middle and high school students, which has a large amount of unused funds. Meanwhile, the Federal Highway Administration would lose \$650 million from a one-time program for the states that Obama was not seeking to renew in 2012.

In addition to those cuts, the House bill would revoke \$2.7 billion that Congress dedicated last year to more than 50 local initiatives known as "earmarks," individual line items sponsored by a single lawmaker. Obama and Republicans have since renounced earmarking as a practice rife with abuse and wasteful spending, making the programs easy targets.

While the bill seemed to find favor Friday among Senate Democrats, its first test will come Tuesday in the House, when Republican leaders plan to open debate on the measure. Senior Republicans said they expect to have little trouble garnering votes for the bill, though it is far less ambitious than the legislation the House approved last week under pressure from conservatives. Earlier this week, Republican leaders held a conference call with the 87 freshmen who propelled the GOP into the majority to keep them apprised of developments and shore up their support.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers (R-Ky.), whose staff drafted the measure, called it "a symbol of our continued commitment to getting our nation's fiscal house in order."

If the bill clears the House, it would then move to the Senate. Senate Democrats initially rejected the two-week measure as a "rehash" that would simply seek to enact the \$61 billion in spending cuts over a shorter period. Their objections softened when it became clear that House Republicans were dropping the most objectionable cuts.

Meanwhile, McConnell, who worked closely with Boehner on GOP strategy over the past two weeks, assured Boehner's team that Democratic opposition was almost irrelevant. In the closely divided Senate, Republicans would have the votes to block any attempt by Democrats to change the House proposal. The House bill would be left as the only legislative vehicle for funding the government as the clock ticked toward midnight Friday. That would force Democrats either to vote to approve the House

measure or to accept blame for closing down the government.

Whatever happens next week, Republicans pledge to continue waging their battle to reduce the size of government.

"Democrats during this debate have said Republican cuts are draconian," Rep. Peter Roskam (R-Ill.) told reporters Friday. "But it's clear that the only thing that's draconian is the idea of defending the status quo in Washington."

Staff writer Karen Tumulty and polling manager Peyton Craighill contributed to this report.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

Boehner signals reluctance about shutdown

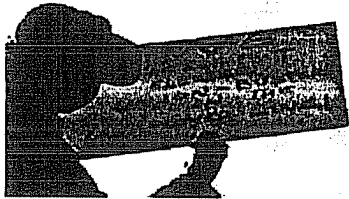
'Americans want the government to stay open,' the House speaker says. Meanwhile, a Democratic senator indicates that a Republican spending plan could lead to a temporary agreement.

29Share
0diggsdigg

- Related



- [Obama, governors to meet as states face cutoff of funds](#)
- [Senate Democrats welcome GOP proposal to avoid shutdown](#)



- [Protests unite public, private union workers](#)

By Tom Hamburger, Washington Bureau

February 28, 2011

- [✉ E-mail](#)
- [🖨 Print](#)
- [Share](#)
- [▲▼ Text Size](#)

Reporting from Washington —

House Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) told a convention of religious broadcasters in Nashville on Sunday evening that a federal government shutdown was not appropriate and not what the electorate wanted.

His remarks were the latest sign that congressional leaders were backing away from the brink of a shutdown.

"Americans want the government to stay open, and they want it to spend less money,"

Boehner said. "We don't need to shut down the government to accomplish that. We just need to do what the American people are asking of us."

He cited "the moral responsibility" to reduce the federal deficit and cut government largesse while keeping the government open, but he said Congress also had a responsibility to address Social Security and Medicare spending.

Also Sunday, Democratic Sen. Kent Conrad of North Dakota told CNN's "State of the Union" that Republicans' latest proposal for an interim spending plan seemed likely to lead to an agreement on temporarily funding the government.

"It is acceptable to me to have \$4 billion in savings in a two-week package," said Conrad, chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, referring to cuts in the stopgap spending measure that House Republican leaders offered late last week. "That negotiation is ongoing, and I'm confident we'll achieve conclusion on that."

Lawmakers return from a weeklong congressional recess Tuesday. The continuing resolution that funds the government expires at midnight Friday.

Earlier, Democrats and Republicans deadlocked over a GOP plan that would cut \$61 billion in spending this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. That plan passed the Republican-controlled House, but Democrats say the cuts are too steep. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) offered a spending freeze while lawmakers debated further cuts; Republicans rejected that idea.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, told CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday that a government shutdown was not a wise way to proceed "unless that's the only way to forward your principles."

"Their job is to solve these problems and not just to stand in the corner and hold their breath," Christie said. "So — and I say that about both sides — so let's get together. They've got a week to figure it out."

[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

Monday, Feb. 28, 2011

The Budget Showdown: A Temporary Reprieve

By ADAM SORENSEN

(WASHINGTON) — At the end of this week, hundreds of thousands of workers will be furloughed, agencies shuttered and new government benefits suspended if Congress doesn't act to reopen cash flow to the federal infrastructure. Rhetorical volleys between Democrats and Republicans in recent days suggest a short-lived agreement is near, and March 4 won't see the first government shutdown since 1995. But that doesn't mean the budget impasse is waning.

Last Friday, House Appropriations chairman Hal Rogers and the Republican leadership unveiled a package of \$4 billion in cuts that would be tied to two more weeks of government funding. It appears to be a good faith effort to buy more time. If the cuts were stretched out over the remaining fiscal year, the dollar amount would scale to \$61 billion, equal to the total amount called for in the House GOP's ambitiously austere yearlong proposal, thus mollifying dogmatic Tea Party freshmen. But while the scope of the package is unyielding, its contents are largely uncontroversial. Rather than thrust cuts to Planned Parenthood or public broadcasting on Democrats who would undoubtedly reject them, Republicans picked a number of programs that Obama already proposed to nix (or, at very least, didn't plan to expand). The measure would eliminate \$250 million from the Striving Readers program at the Education Department, \$650 million to the Federal Highways Administration and a host of agency earmarks, among other snips. There may be a few areas of contention, but the proposal isn't packed with poison pills that would force Democrats to reject it and give Republicans an opening to blame them for the looming shutdown. ([See the top 10 knockdown congressional battles.](#))

The Democratic response has been mostly positive. Senate Budget Committee chairman Kent Conrad, the Democrats' lead negotiator, called the package "acceptable" on Sunday. Majority Leader Reid's office reported he was "encouraged." Those comments are enough to suggest that the new continuing resolution will pass this week and the deadline to avoid a shutdown will be bumped back to March 18. But the most important thing to understand about these cuts is that this is the easiest it gets. For all the talk of "waste, fraud and abuse" in government, slashing non-security discretionary spending without nicking one party's priority or another's is difficult. When it comes to bipartisan agreement, the supply of obvious cuts is quickly exhausted. A successful short-term agreement means very little for the prospects

of a lasting deal.

Just consider the origins of the current predicament. Since the beginning of 2011, the federal government has been operating on a crude, temporary continuation of last year's budget, the details of which were largely mapped out in early 2009. Those spending levels were set long before Democrats passed their sweeping overhauls of health care and financial regulations, Tea Party calls for austerity made waves in the midterm elections, or the depth of the recession and the resulting short-term fiscal crisis were fully known. In light of those new realities, Democratic and Republican priorities further diverged and the two parties found themselves unable to pass a new budget for 2011. Republicans are eager to bleed dry the new regulatory beasts, new GOP members of Congress feel beholden to the Tea Party, and Speaker Boehner's decision to allow a wide-open amendment process on his party's budget proposal has put a spate of deep cuts forward that Democrats will never agree to, but that Boehner will be hard-pressed to abandon. ([Read "Why Boehner Doesn't Want a Government Shutdown."](#))

Even as passage of a temporary agreement nears, the same schisms remain. In his weekly radio address Saturday, President Obama tipped his hat to cuts, but mounted a unequivocal defense of some of the initiatives Republicans are bent on eliminating. "I'm willing to consider any serious ideas to help us reduce the deficit — no matter what party is proposing them," he said. "But instead of cutting the investments in education and innovation we need to out-compete the rest of the world, we need a balanced approach to deficit reduction. We all need to be willing to sacrifice, but we can't sacrifice our future." Meanwhile, in the parallel Republican address, Ohio Senator Rob Portman made the case for broader short-term cuts, saying, "Getting our debt and deficits under control is the first step we can take, and the single most important step Washington can take, to get our economy moving and create the jobs we so badly need."

We know at least one thing from the Republicans' offer of a continuing resolution and the swift Democratic assent: Both sides are telling the truth when they say they don't want to see a government shutdown on Friday. But if one looks weeks and months down the road, it's still hard to see a path they can jointly take to avoid one.

[See TIME's Pictures of the Week.](#)

[See the Cartoons of the Week.](#)

 [Click to Print](#)

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2055782,00.html>