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Congress OKs stopgap bill to keep government open

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With a \$410 billion catchall spending bill stalled in the Senate and a midnight deadline looming, Congress rushed through stopgap legislation Friday to keep the government running for another five days.

The House passed the bill by a 328-50 vote; the Senate acted by unanimous voice vote. President Barack Obama will sign the measure later Friday.

The stopgap measure was needed because on Thursday night, Senate Republicans unexpectedly put the brakes on the sweeping measure. The so-called omnibus bill would award domestic agencies with big spending increases and it also contains about 8,000 pet projects sought by lawmakers.

House Republicans unsuccessfully tried to freeze most domestic agencies at current levels, but were easily defeated.

"Spending as usual with thousands upon thousands of earmarks and special projects is not what the American people expect from this Congress during these difficult times," said Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind.

With most Republicans denouncing the bill as too costly and a few Democrats opposing it as well, Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., called off a key procedural vote — just one vote short of the 60 needed to send the measure to the White House.

Several Republicans who support the bill withheld their support of the procedural vote to force Reid to let other Republicans offer amendments, including ones to extend a local school voucher program in Washington, D.C., and to require lawmakers to approve their pay hikes instead of getting automatic cost-of-living raises every year.

With the vote postponed until at least Tuesday, both the House and Senate had to pass the stopgap spending measure by midnight Friday to prevent a shutdown of most domestic agencies. Midnight is when a temporary law that keeps the government in business, mostly at 2008 spending levels, expires.

If the larger spending bill ends up being amended by the Senate, the House would again have to act on that bill, giving Republicans more chances to launch political attacks.

In fact, Reid says House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has threatened to pull the plug on the measure altogether if it is amended by the Senate. The government would instead run on automatic pilot under legislation keeping agencies operating at current levels. That would deny senators and House members all of their pet projects.

"She said, 'We have put our members through a lot over here on this appropriations bill. I am not going to put them through any more,'" Reid recalled on Wednesday.

Amid the debate over spending, the government delivered more bad economic news on Friday — a spike in unemployment to 8.1 percent. That prompted the top House Republican to call for a freeze on spending until the end of the fiscal year and plead with President Barack Obama to veto the Senate measure.

Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, said the bill is loaded with "unscrutinized taxpayer-funded earmarks" that are "a textbook example of why Americans have grown so fed up with Washington."

Democrats and their allies control 58 seats, though at least a few Democrats oppose the measure over its cost or changes in U.S. policy toward Cuba. That meant Democrats needed five or six Republican votes to advance the bill. But key Republicans such as Olympia Snowe of Maine withheld their votes to force Reid to open the measure to further amendments.

The huge, 1,132-page spending bill awards big increases to domestic programs and is stuffed with pet projects sought by lawmakers in both parties. The measure has an extraordinary reach, wrapping together nine spending bills to fund the annual operating budgets of every Cabinet department except for Defense, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs.

The measure was written mostly over the course of last year, before projected deficits quadrupled and Obama's economic recovery bill left many of the same spending accounts swimming in cash. Initially, the bill attracted bipartisan support, but most Republicans developed sticker shock in the wake of enactment of the \$787 billion economic stimulus bill.

And, to the embarrassment of Obama — who promised during last year's campaign to force Congress to curb its pork-barrel ways — the bill contains 7,991 pet projects totaling \$5.5 billion, according to calculations by the GOP staff of the House Appropriations Committee.

On the Net:

Taxpayers for Common Sense: www.taxpayer.net

House Appropriations Committee: appropriations.house.gov/

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2009/03/06/national/w093013S45.DTL>