

Congress OKs bipartisan budget deal, but road ahead not easy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress sent President Barack Obama a bipartisan budget accord Friday that staves off a destabilizing U.S. default, eases the threat of a federal shutdown and spotlights the pitfalls — and opportunities — posed by the current brand of divided government.

The Senate used a post-midnight, 64-35 vote to ship the package to the White House. The House approved the measure two days earlier by a similarly comfortable 266-167 margin, and Obama plans to sign it Monday.

Yet those no-sweat votes masked turmoil beneath the surface. The Republicans who run Congress opposed the legislation by a 2-1 edge in each chamber, telegraphing challenges ahead for Obama, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and their new governing partner, House Speaker Paul Ryan.

WHAT'S IN THE BUDGET AGREEMENT?

There's an extra \$50 billion this year and \$30 billion next year for spending, split between defense and domestic programs. That's moderately more than the \$1.1 trillion annually the government already planned to spend.

There'll be no huge increase in Medicare premiums for doctor's care that would have hit 15 million people, or cuts in 11 million disabled workers' Social Security disability benefits.

Savings include trimming future Medicare reimbursements

to some health-care providers, selling oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and boosting some employers' costs for insuring workers' pensions.

Most importantly, the extra dollars make it likely Congress will fund the government after Dec. 11, when agencies otherwise would run out of money and would have to close. And the Treasury Department was given authority to borrow money until March 2017 — avoiding a first-ever federal default next week, which economists warn could badly wound the economy.

Yet the deal underscores the boundaries on how far the two parties can get these days.

Its major achievement was to avoid two awful scenarios that most in Washington were desperate to avoid. Its contents are modest, falling shy of the bigger spending boosts Democrats would love to win and lacking far larger savings Republicans would love to wring from giant entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare.

BUT SMOOTH SAILING AHEAD, RIGHT?

Please. Lawmakers still must approve additional legislation by Dec. 11 detailing how much money each agency will get, and for which programs.

Initial versions of those bills contain GOP-written provisions that Obama and Democrats consider nonstarters. That includes language to block federal funds for Planned Parenthood, curb enforcement of clean air and water rules, hinder



AP Photo/Susan Walsh
House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of Calif., second from right, listens as Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nev., right, talks to reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington, on Wednesday.

Obama's efforts to improve trade with Cuba, undo controls over financial institutions enacted after the Great Recession and undermine the president's health care overhaul.

In a statement Friday praising the budget pact, Obama signaled confrontations ahead, warning Republicans against "getting sidetracked by ideological provisions."

THOSE RAMBUNCTIOUS REPUBLICANS

This week's votes showed the juggling facing McConnell, R-Ky., and Ryan, R-Wis., when it comes to winning GOP votes for bills Obama would sign.

Not that getting his signature is always a priority. Approaching the 2016 election year, Republicans would be happy to push bills through Congress highlighting GOP

priorities if they can, even though Obama wouldn't let them become law.

But when it comes to cutting deals with the president that GOP leaders think will benefit their party — like avoiding a shutdown or default — plenty of Republicans have little motivation to cooperate, especially when they know others will provide the votes to get the bills through.

Hardcore conservatives, like the few dozen members of the House Freedom Caucus, have deep ideological differences with Obama. Many, plus other GOP lawmakers, represent areas whose conservative voters could oust them in a party primary if they're too accommodating to the president. Republican Sens. Richard Burr of

North Carolina, Johnny Isakson of Georgia, Rob Portman of Ohio and Charles Grassley of Iowa, mainstream conservatives with pragmatic streaks, would all like to avoid serious primary challenges next year and all opposed the budget deal.

Then there are the GOP presidential hopefuls, who must lure conservative voters sure to flock to their party's 2016 primaries and caucuses. Sens. Rand Paul of Kentucky, Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas all opposed the budget agreement, though South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, an aggressive supporter of the Pentagon, backed it.

A PATHWAY TO ACHIEVEMENT

The House Freedom Caucus dogged former Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, until he resigned and derailed the rise of his expected successor, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

But they came under pressure to not overplay their hand and accept Ryan, who is widely respected across the GOP. And badly outnumbered among the House's 247 Republicans, two votes this week showed how they can be trampled when necessary — by bipartisan coalitions.

First, business-friendly Republicans combined with Democrats to revive the Export-Import Bank, which helps U.S. exporters.

Then before departing, Boehner pushed the budget deal through, uniting Republicans eager to avoid a default and shutdown with Democrats to rout conservative opponents.



AP Photo/David Zalubowski, file
In this Oct. 15 file photo, a man holds a placard while soliciting motorists for work at a major intersection just south of downtown Denver.

Panhandling laws face challenge after ruling

Associated Press

DENVER — Cities trying to limit panhandling in downtowns and tourist areas are facing a new legal hurdle because of a recent Supreme Court ruling that seemingly has nothing to do with asking for money.

Federal judges in at least three states have cited a June ruling by the high court on the size of church signs as a reason for overturning anti-panhandling laws or sending cases disputing those laws back to lower courts for review. One of those cases — in the western Colorado city of Grand Junction — has spurred Colorado communities including Denver and Boulder to suspend or change their laws restricting where and when people can panhandle.

The reason is something called content discrimination. The Supreme Court ruled that the town of Gilbert, Arizona, did not have the right to limit the size of signs put up to direct worshippers to services at a small church because the town didn't set the same limits for real estate or political signs. The same issue has been raised in lawsuits filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups challenging anti-panhandling laws.

U.S. District Judge Christine Arguello ruled on Sept. 30 that it was unconstitutional for Grand Junction to bar people from asking for money after dark and near bus stops and restaurant patios because they singled out a kind of speech — asking for money — for special treatment without a compelling reason.

Arguello had concluded earlier in the case brought by the state ACLU that the law was discriminatory but said the Supreme Court church signs ruling made it clear that laws that limit speech on broad topics, not just particular viewpoints, also amount to content discrimination. She let stand parts of the law that prohibit panhandlers from threatening people.

After the Grand Junction ruling, Boulder quickly got rid of panhandling restrictions along its pedestrian mall,

Longmont suspended its enforcement of panhandling laws and the Denver City Council is considering removing its restrictions on when and where panhandlers can solicit money but plans to keep its ban on threatening behavior. Colorado Springs also suspended portions of its law at the urging of the ACLU before the Grand Junction ruling.

Appeals courts also have sent challenges to anti-panhandling laws in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Springfield, Illinois, back to lower courts to reconsider them in light of the Supreme Court's ruling. Decisions on both are still pending.

The debate over panhandling laws comes at a time when more cities have sought to restrict where people can ask for money. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty says 76 percent of cities banned panhandling in some locations in 2014, a 20 percent increase since 2011. Many cities say the laws are meant not to discourage giving to people in need but to protect residents and help keep their communities safe.

Mark Silverstein, legal director of the ACLU of Colorado, thinks most panhandling laws nationally have been written so broadly that many of them also will have to be changed because of the ruling. His lawyers plan to tell cities in Colorado about the changes they think are needed.

"The government can't pass a law to ban all speech that's annoying or irritating," he said.

Some constitutional experts think the sign ruling also could have implications beyond panhandling including government regulation of advertising, securities and communications.

While some see that as a good thing for free speech, others, like Yale Law School Dean Robert Post, see potential problems. He said the ruling was written so broadly that it applies to commercial speech and could be used, for example, to try to block the Federal Trade Commission's sanctions against misleading advertisements.

BRIEFLY

Calif. fines water suppliers for failure to cut back

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — State officials for the first time are fining California water suppliers for failing to meet a mandated 25 percent reduction in water use in the state's battle against a widespread drought.

The \$61,000 fines are being imposed on Beverly Hills, Indio, Redlands and the Coachella Valley Water District.

Redlands spokesman Carl Baker said the city learned of the fine late Thursday and said officials will seek direction on how to respond from the City Council on Tuesday. He declined to elaborate.

For a fourth straight month, Californians as a whole have cut back water consumption by more than 25

percent since Gov. Jerry Brown put that mandate into effect last June.

In September, Californians reduced water use by more than 26 percent.

Statewide cutbacks amounted to 27 percent in August, 31 percent in July and 27 percent in June.

That put the state more than halfway toward its goal of saving 1.2 million acre-feet of water between June 2015 and February 2016.

An acre-foot or 325,851 gallons is about enough water to supply two households for a year.

Kentucky fugitive dies in shootout after manhunt

BURKESVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A fugitive accused of shooting a Tennessee police officer and firing at a Kentucky trooper was killed in a

shootout with authorities early Friday, ending a nearly weeklong manhunt and relieving a community on the eve of Halloween.

Floyd Ray Cook, 62, was killed in south-central Kentucky after being confronted by state troopers and a federal marshal searching an embankment, Kentucky State Police spokesman Billy Gregory told The Associated Press.

Cook was armed with a handgun and exchanged gunfire with the officers south of Burkesville, Gregory said. No officers were injured.

The manhunt began after Cook was accused of shooting and wounding an Algood, Tennessee, police officer during a traffic stop last Saturday afternoon. He fled in a truck. A swath of the border between Kentucky and Tennessee had been gripped with fear.



ENERGY COSTS TOO HIGH? TRY LOOKING AT IT IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT.

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