

Summer looms with GOP stuck on health care, budget, taxes

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans are stuck on health care, can't pass a budget, and hopes for a big, bipartisan infrastructure package are fizzling. Overhauling the tax code looks more and more like a distant dream.

The GOP-led Congress has yet to salt away a single major legislative accomplishment for President Donald Trump — and a summer of drift may lead to a logistical nightmare this fall.

Instead, Trump's allies appear both divided and indecisive, unable to deliver on his agenda while letting other must-do congressional business — chiefly their core responsibilities of passing a budget and spending bills, and keeping the government solvent — slide onto an already daunting fall agenda that is looking more and more like it'll be a train wreck.

Friday brought more bad news for Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and other House leaders as 20 GOP moderates signaled a revolt on the budget, penning a letter to Ryan announcing their opposition to an emerging plan to force cuts to government agencies and benefit programs such as food stamps. The letter, authored by Rep. Charlie Dent, R-Pa., warned that without an agreement with Democrats on increasing agency spending,



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

The Capitol in Washington is quiet after lawmakers departed for the Independence Day recess on Friday.

moderates will be "reticent to support any budget."

"It's looking like they're very disorganized. They got obviously a lot of conflict over spending preferences and it's not just a two-way conflict," said top House Budget Committee Democrat John Yarmuth of Kentucky. "It's just a tough Rubik's Cube they're trying to solve."

So it's not just the Senate effort to repeal and replace Democrat Barack Obama's health care law

that's foundering. The annual congressional budget measure — a prerequisite to this fall's hoped-for tax effort — is languishing as well, as are the 12 annual spending bills that typically consume weeks of House floor time each summer.

But GOP leaders say all is going well. Ryan told a Wisconsin radio host on Thursday that "it's the most productive Congress since the mid-'80s" and issued a news release Friday titled "Despite What You May Hear, We Are Getting

Things Done." The release cites a bipartisan Department of Veterans Affairs accountability measure and 14 bills repealing Obama-era regulations as Congress' top achievements.

"It would be hard to fault the average American for thinking all that's going on in Washington these days is high-drama hearings and partisan sniping," Ryan said. "But amid the countdown clocks and cable news chatter, something important is happening: Congress is getting things done to help improve people's lives."

In the first year of a presidency, the annual August congressional recess is a traditional point to take stock. By that point, Obama had signed an economic recovery bill and President George W. Bush had won his landmark tax cuts, while President Bill Clinton was celebrating a hard-fought budget package. Trump has no comparable successes to trumpet — but his allies in Congress say they're not worried.

"We laid out an agenda in November and December, and we're needing to get there," said House Rules Committee Chairman Pete Sessions, R-Texas. "And we can effectively get there. The questions that confound us are those that we can answer

ourselves. And we will."

And as Republicans are stalled on health care, the budget and infrastructure, there are several other problems that need to be taken care of, including increasing the nation's borrowing authority, preventing a government shutdown, and lifting budget "caps" that are hobbling efforts to beef up the military.

Unlike health care, the debt limit and a deal to fix the spending caps — a leftover from a failed 2011 budget deal — can only be resolved with Democratic help. However, they promise to consume political capital and valuable time and energy, and there's no political pay-off, other than forestalling disaster.

First, Congress is off on vacation to return in July for a three-week session. Then comes the traditional monthlong August recess.

After Labor Day comes a four-week sprint to October and the deadline to avert a government shutdown with a temporary spending bill — and to forestall a disastrous default on U.S. obligations by lifting the debt limit, which is a politically toxic vote for many Republicans.

Sentiment is building among some lawmakers to shorten the recess to make progress on the unfinished work that is piling up.

BRIEFLY

GOP bill would let churches endorse political candidates

WASHINGTON (AP) — Churches should have the right to endorse political candidates and still keep their tax-free status, say House Republicans targeting a law that prohibits outright politicking from the pulpit.

Republicans repeatedly have failed to scrap the law preventing churches and other nonprofits from backing candidates, so now they are trying to starve it. With little fanfare, a House Appropriations subcommittee added a provision that would deny money to the IRS to enforce the 63-year-old law to a bill to fund the Treasury Department, Securities and Exchange Commission and other agencies. The subcommittee passed the bill Thursday.

Republicans say the law is enforced unevenly, leaving religious leaders uncertain about what they are allowed to say and do.

Some Democrats say the measure comes too close to mixing church and state.

They say religious leaders already have First Amendment rights, just like anyone else.

But if they want to get political, they don't have a constitutional right not to pay taxes.

Trump suggests just repeal Obamacare, replace later

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump barged into Senate Republicans' delicate health care negotiations Friday, declaring that if lawmakers can't reach a deal they should simply repeal "Obamacare" right away and then replace it later on.

Trump's tweet revives an approach that GOP leaders and the president himself considered but dismissed months ago as impractical and politically unwise. And it's likely to further complicate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's task as he struggles to bridge the divide between GOP moderates and conservatives as senators leave Washington for the Fourth of July break without having voted on a health care bill as planned.

The president sent his early-morning tweet shortly after Nebraska Republican

Sen. Ben Sasse appeared on Fox News Channel's "Fox & Friends" to talk about a letter he had sent to Trump making that exact suggestion: a vote on repealing former President Barack Obama's health law followed by a new effort at a working out a replacement.

Trump is a known "Fox & Friends" viewer, but Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky also claimed credit for recommending the tactic to the president in a conversation earlier in the week.

Trump travel ban won't keep engaged couples apart

NEW YORK (AP) — Paul Gottinger, who applied nearly a year ago to bring his Iranian fiancée to the United States so they could be married, went to bed feeling hopeless.

The Trump administration's travel ban, as first outlined on Wednesday, required people from six mostly Muslim countries to have a business or close family relationship with someone in the U.S. to get a visa.

Siblings, parents or spouses made the list; fiancés didn't.

But then government officials abruptly changed course, just hours before the new rules went into effect Thursday evening. The travel ban would not keep engaged couples apart after all.

"This one more crazy twist on the roller coaster," Gottinger, a 34-year-old journalist from Minnesota said by telephone Friday from Istanbul, Turkey, where the couple go to spend time with each other. "We're relieved, but we have a long way to go."

Before the State Department relented, immigration lawyers said it made no sense to exclude fiancés because there is already rigorous vetting aimed at rooting out marriage fraud.

Foreigners engaged to marry a U.S. citizen have long had to provide detailed documentation of the relationship's authenticity and undergo background checks to get a fiancé visa, known as a K-1.

Scrutiny of such visas increased after the 2015 San Bernardino, California, massacre that left 14 people dead.

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