

Trump relents, signs pandemic relief bill

By Jill Colvin, Lisa Mascaro and Andrew Taylor
Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Donald Trump has signed a \$900 billion pandemic relief package, ending days of drama over his refusal to accept the bipartisan deal that will deliver long-sought cash to businesses and individuals and avert a federal government shutdown.

The deal also provides \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September and contains other end-of-session priorities such as an increase in food stamp benefits.

The signing Sunday, at his private club in Florida, came as he faced escalating criticism over his eleventh-hour demands for larger, \$2,000 relief checks and scaled-back spending even though the bill had already passed the House and Senate by wide margins. The bill was passed with what lawmakers had thought was Trump’s blessing, and after months of negotiations with his administration.

His foot-dragging resulted in a lapse in unemployment benefits for millions and threatened a government shutdown in the midst of a pandemic. But signing the bill into law prevents another crisis of Trump’s own creation and ends a standoff with his own party during the final days of his administration.

It was unclear what, if anything, Trump accomplished with his delay, beyond angering all sides and empowering Democrats to continue their push for higher relief checks, which his own party opposes.

In his statement, Trump repeated his frustrations with the COVID-19 relief bill for providing only \$600 checks to most Americans instead of



Al Drago/Getty Images-TNS

President Donald Trump waves as he departs on the South Lawn of the White House.

“I will sign the Omnibus and Covid package with a strong message that makes clear to Congress that wasteful items need to be removed.”

— President Donald Trump

the \$2,000 that his fellow Republicans already rejected. He also complained about what he considered unnecessary spending by the government at large.

“I will sign the Omnibus and Covid package with a strong message that makes clear to Congress that wasteful items need to be removed,” Trump said in the statement.

While the president insisted he would send Congress “a redlined version” with items to be removed under the rescission process, those are merely suggestions to Congress. The bill, as signed, would not necessarily be changed.

Democrats, who have the majority in the House, immediately vowed to prevent any

cuts. Democrats “will reject any rescissions” submitted by the president, said Rep. Nita Lowey of New York, chair of the Appropriations Committee.

Lawmakers now have breathing room to continue debating whether the relief checks should be as large as the president has demanded. The Democratic-led House supports the larger checks and is set to vote on the issue Monday, but it’s expected to be ignored by the Republican-held Senate, where spending faces opposition. For now, the administration can only begin work sending out the \$600 payments.

Republican Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama, a conservative who supported Trump’s extraordinary and futile challenge of the election results, counted himself Monday among the opponents of a more generous relief package and Trump’s call for higher payments.

“It’s money we don’t have, we have to borrow to get and we can’t afford to pay back,” he said on “Fox and Friends.”

“Someone’s got to show me how we’re going to pay for it. How far before we all go into debilitating insolvency and bankruptcy?”

But Republican Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York said she was open to the idea of \$2,000 checks. “Many Americans are in dire need of relief,” she said on the show.

Altogether, Republicans and Democrats alike swiftly welcomed Trump’s decision to sign the bill into law.

“The compromise bill is not perfect, but it will do an enormous amount of good for struggling Kentuckians and Americans across the country who need help now,” said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. “I thank the President for signing this relief into law.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., called the signing “welcome news for the fourteen million Americans who just lost the lifeline of unemployment benefits on Christmas weekend, and for the millions more struggling to stay afloat during this historic pandemic and economic crisis.”

Others slammed Trump’s delay in turning the bill into law. In a tweet, Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-Va., accused Trump of having “played Russian roulette with American lives. A familiar and comfortable place for him.”

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he would offer Trump’s proposal for \$2,000 checks for a vote in Senate — putting Republicans on the spot.

“The House will pass a bill to give Americans \$2,000 checks,” Schumer tweeted. “Then I will move to pass it in the Senate.” He said no Democrats will object. “Will Senate Republicans?”

APPEALS

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Young said most of the violations listed in DEQ documents happened before Huntington’s new wastewater treatment plant started operating in October 2019.

The city received a \$3 million federal grant in 2015 to build the plant and replace its sewer system.

According to DEQ documents, Huntington’s violations included:

- During August and September 2019, the city failed to monitor several aspects of the wastewater treatment system, including the volume of wastewater, depth of wastewater in treatment lagoons, and average daily flow into the Burnt River, into which treated wastewater is released.
- From October through December 2019, and in January and February 2020, the city didn’t monitor its wastewater lagoon system as required by its permit.
- In 2017, 2018 and 2019 the city failed to calibrate its wastewater flow meter.
- In February 2019 the city failed to monitor the flow level in the Burnt River.
- The city submitted its final plans and specifications for its wastewater system on April 25, 2017, almost a month after its March 31, 2017, deadline.
- The city finished its wastewater system in September 2019, after its deadline of Nov. 1, 2018.
- In June 2018 the city released wastewater into the Burnt River that had a monthly average concentration of E. coli bacteria of 596 organisms per 100 milliliters, above the permitted limit of 126 per 100 milliliters. E. coli numbers are an indication that wastewater might not have been adequately treated.
- In January and February of 2018, from January through June 2019, and in November and December 2018 and July 2019, the city released wastewater into the Burnt River that contained ammonia concentrations exceeding the permitted level.

In the two months in 2018, the city’s ammonia limit was 31.8 milligrams per liter. The actual concentrations for those two months were 34.1 in January and 46.8 in February.

For the six months in 2019, the city’s ammonia limit was 8.6 milligrams per liter. The actual monthly concentrations ranged from 12.9 in June 2019 to 44.6 in January 2019.

- The city exceeded its permitted monthly average for total suspended solids in its treated wastewater in September 2017, May 2018, and June and July 2019, in percentages ranging from 24% to 52%.
- The city exceeded its permitted concentrations of “biological oxygen demand,” a measurement that indicates the amount of organic waste in treated water, in May and August of 2018, in March and June of 2019 and in April of 2020, in percentages ranging from 17% to 396%.

When wastewater contains high amounts of organic matter it can reduce the amount of dissolved oxygen in water, which can harm fish and other aquatic life.

Young said she’s confident that Huntington’s current wastewater treatment facility has fixed the problems outlined in the DEQ reports.

According to O’Donnell’s letter, Huntington could potentially qualify to have some of the fines forgiven by sponsoring an environmentally beneficial project.

La Grande VA Clinic to receive vaccine by mid-January

By Dick Mason
The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — Veterans, including those served by the La Grande VA Clinic, will be among the first in Northeast Oregon to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

Linda Wondra, public affairs officer for the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, which oversees the La Grande clinic, said Saturday, Dec. 26, that veterans in Northeast Oregon may begin receiving calls inviting them to come in and get free Moderna COVID-19 shots by mid-January. The La Grande VA clinic will be among the

“We are very excited.”

— Linda Wondra, public affairs officer, Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Walla Walla, Washington, which oversees the clinic in La Grande

sites where the vaccine will be provided.

The vaccine will come from the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, which received the vaccine Dec. 22. The Walla Walla VA, with a service area encompassing Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington, has been vaccinating all of its staff who have direct contact with veterans including doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners since then.

“We started right away. We didn’t miss a beat,” Wondra said. “We are very excited.”

Frontline workers who are set to be vaccinated this week include staff at the La Grande VA Clinic.

Once all front line workers within the Walla Walla VA are vaccinated, veterans who are enrolled with the VA will begin being contacted. Veterans will need a scheduled appointment before they can

receive the vaccine.

“We will not be taking walk-ins,” Wondra said.

There is no need for enrolled veterans to pre-register or come into a clinic to sign up.

If a veteran is not enrolled with the VA, they can check eligibility by going to the VA’s “how to apply for VA health care” site at va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply/. From this site, veterans can apply online or download the VA form 10-10EZ form.

Veterans who are at higher risk will be the first to be contacted about vaccination appointments. Those most

vulnerable to COVID-19 include individuals who are age 60 and older and who have underlying health conditions.

The Walla Walla VA is one of 113 VA Medical Centers across the country to receive the first limited supply of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

“Receiving the vaccine is like having hope delivered. As vaccine supplies increase, our ultimate goal is to offer

COVID-19 vaccinations to all veterans and employees who want to be vaccinated,” said Chris Bjornberg, the Walla Walla VA’s Medical Center Director in a press release.

The Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was 94% effective in clinical trials in preventing COVID-19 disease, according to the press release.

The vaccine is administered in two doses, 28 days apart.

CHURCHES

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Smith noted masks always are available at the front of the church and the center’s ushers do wear them, though he himself did not wear a mask during the service despite the crowded environment.

“No, I don’t wear a mask,” he said. “Preaching with a microphone, nobody would be able to hear. It’s hard enough to hear with the microphone, the lapel microphone, there’s no way anybody would be able to hear. It’d be all muffled if I wore a mask the whole time. It’s the same way with our singers. ... It’d be almost impossible to try to have a normal service with masks on.”

He also insisted that holding Christmas services online or through virtual formats was not an option.

“It’s just not the same,” Smith said. “The experience, being in church with people, seeing the expressions on

their faces, the celebration of Jesus being born and the reason and everything that it’s all about, it’s just not the same watching virtually. We have a virtual audience, and we make that available for people, but we encourage people to come in person.”

Smith continued to defend his church’s gathering by citing a passage from Hebrews.

“The Bible’s very clear in that God says ‘don’t forsake the gathering of the Saints,’ and it’s because corporate worship is God’s idea, and so he blesses it,” Smith said. “And we want his presence, we want his ministry. ... It’s just absolutely not the same virtually.”

Other faith organizations, however, found ways to celebrate the holiday that mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19.

La Grande’s United Methodist, Zion Lutheran and St. Peter’s Episcopal churches all turned to modified formats for Christmas services. United Methodist, for example, planned to hold an outdoor Christmas Eve gathering in downtown La Grande where masks and social distancing were required. No singing was planned.

Others have posted services online and provided virtual resources to help

households safely connect during the pandemic.

Among the myriad of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is the challenge of practicing congregational faith safely during a pandemic that has killed more than 300,000 Americans. The Oregon Health Authority has issued guidance on how to hold faith gatherings while minimizing the risk of spreading the disease.

The OHA’s full guidance on COVID-19 safety for faith institutions can be found on its website at oregon.gov/oha.

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