

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Senate Begins Debate On Economic Stimulus Bill

On Nov. 13, the Senate began debate on the Democratic version of an economic stimulus bill. The bill had been reported out of the Finance Committee on Nov. 8, in a markup that was laced with sharply partisan rhetoric. On the tax side, the bill provides rebate checks to low-income workers who didn't get rebates in the first round of tax cuts earlier this year. It gives \$22 billion in business tax relief, including an employer wage credit of up to \$4,800 for employers in lower Manhattan. On the non-tax side, the bill provides an extra 13 weeks of unemployment insurance, subsidies for extended health insurance coverage for unemployed workers, and increased Federal assistance for Medicaid and agriculture assistance programs.

Committee Republicans were so incensed at the procedure adopted by the Democrats that they didn't even bother to introduce amendments in committee. Ranking committee member Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) complained that "the fix is in," and that the GOP will, instead, challenge the bill on the Senate floor. On the other hand, Democrats complained that the GOP alternative bill is just a collection of tax breaks for the wealthiest individuals and corporations.

The acrimonious debate came one day after the U.S. Conference of Mayors endorsed the Democratic plan. The leadership of the conference held a meeting with Senate Democrats to discuss the needs of the cities in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. Specifically, the mayors endorsed a plan proposed by Senators Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) to spend up to \$20 billion for security enhancements and job creation. That plan was not part of the bill marked up by the Finance Committee, but Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) indicated that he would bring the

Byrd/Reid plan to the floor as an amendment.

Appropriators, White House In Standoff Over Spending

President George Bush's veto threat, issued on Nov. 6 against any spending bills that include money above the \$40 billion in emergency spending voted up after the Sept. 11 attacks, has not cowed members of the Appropriations Committee in either House. In fact, members of the two committees from both parties were rather insulted when Office of Management and Budget Director Mitch Daniels labelled them "big spenders."

While the House GOP leadership is backing Bush, rank-and-file Republicans are moving ahead with their proposals. James Walsh (R-N.Y.), a member of the Appropriations Committee, is leading an effort, supported by Democrats, to gain another \$11 billion for New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, for reconstruction and to help workers who lost their jobs as a result of the Sept. 11 attacks. Walsh is trying to use the Defense appropriations bill as a vehicle for an amendment he is sponsoring. Democrats are also seeking spending increases of about \$7 billion in areas such as bioterrorism, anti-proliferation, and domestic security programs, and another \$6.5 billion for defense. Their proposals are crafted such that the President doesn't have to spend the money, if he decides he doesn't need to.

David Obey (D-Wisc.) told reporters on Nov. 8, that two weeks ago, the White House seemed quite open minded about needs that many in the GOP had said must be addressed. Since then, however, "something has happened in the White House." Appearing at the press conference with Obey, Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) said, "The time to protect the nation

and to act is now." He added, "The security of this country cannot be driven simply by an artificial imposition of a bottom line."

Vice President Dick Cheney has been deployed to try to bring Walsh into line. The White House, seeking to avoid a confrontation, is promising to spend the money later, if Walsh withdraws his amendment in the Appropriations Committee.

Conferees Meet On Aviation Security Bill

Members of a conference committee working on a compromise on an aviation security bill held their first meeting on Nov. 13. While there are several differences between the House and Senate versions, the Federalization of passenger screening remains the most serious sticking point. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.) offered a compromise whereby passenger screening would be Federalized only at the nation's 31 largest airports. House Transportation Committee Chairman Don Young (R-Ak.) said that Hutchison's proposal was a step forward, but House Democrats were less enthusiastic. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.), the ranking member on the Transportation Committee, said he thought such a two-tier system might not be workable.

Proponents of full Federalization cite continuing security breaches, including a chef taking two meat cleavers onto a plane at Miami International Airport on Nov. 13, to show why the current system doesn't work. On Nov. 14, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) said, "People's confidence in the air travel system is at a low point, and that is compounded by the inaction of Congress." Democrats are saying that what the House GOP is pushing for, is essentially a continuation of the current system.