

Some Lawmakers Worried CR Could Affect Reelection Prospects

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By Jonathan E. Kaplan

(Washington, DC) - Democratic leaders' decision to exclude earmarks and to direct federal agencies to ignore legislative language that might look like pork has worried some House freshman Democrats, said one Democratic lawmaker and a senior Democratic aide.

In a meeting last Friday for Democratic chiefs of staff, some staffers worried that the absence of earmarks and an overall spending decrease - spending in the CR will not rise with inflation - would hinder their drive toward reelection.

While earmarks are not popular inside the Beltway, they do resonate with many voters. That is why most legislators do not announce their earmarks until after they have been signed into law. But in the wake of earmark scandals and both parties seeking to claim the mantle of fiscal discipline, boasting about earmarks will likely be on the decline in the 110th Congress.

Another drawback of the CR, congressional officials explained, is that Members' Representational Accounts (MRAs) will remain stuck at 2006 spending levels. A 4 percent increase, for example, would allow lawmakers to hire more staffers or pay current staffers more money. Others worried that libraries, hospitals and other institutions in their districts would be adversely affected by the spending freeze.

Budgets always present party leaders with challenges, and Democratic leaders decided to deploy their whip team to gauge support for the CR. Some lawmakers, such as Rep. Jason Altmire (D-Pa.), told House leaders that they would oppose the bill if it included earmarks and a pay hike for lawmakers. Democratic leaders met Altmire's conditions for a yes vote: increased spending on veterans' healthcare and no cost-of-living adjustment for lawmakers.

That lawmakers would complain about spending levels would not be unusual except for the unique predicament in which Democratic leaders found themselves upon assuming the majority earlier this month.

Faced with having to fund the government for the rest of fiscal year 2007, Democrats would have had to pass nine of 11 appropriations bill that the House Republican majority of 2006 did not. Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.) and Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), the chairmen of the House and Senate Appropriations committees, respectively, decided to cram those nine spending bills into the continuing resolution and to consider the measure without any earmarks or debate.

Democrats and Republicans blamed each other for the process and substance in the budget. Republicans lit into

Democrats, complaining once again that they were not allowed a role in drafting the bill or in amending it on the House floor.

"The CR results from the failure of Republicans to do their work," said Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), referring to the House Republican majority's inability or unwillingness last year to pass the spending bills. "It would be an unending process to open it up."

The bill, which the House will consider tomorrow, has taken on the form of both a conference report and an omnibus spending bill, depending on which party is talking. Hoyer emphasized that the CR was being treated as a conference report, which is not subject to amendments.

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), the ranking Republican on the House Budget Committee, said, "What they're doing is they are rewriting appropriations. This is an omnibus appropriations bill. And to bring an omnibus appropriations bill to the floor with a closed rule and no chance of amendments and no chance at debate is really historic."

In policy memos distributed to GOP staff and reporters, Republicans alleged that the CR included long-term earmarks for programs housed at the Department of Energy and that changes in funding formulas would decimate the Section 8 housing program.

Nevertheless, Democratic lawmakers cheered their leaders at the Democratic Caucus meeting yesterday, said aides who were in the room. House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) led his colleagues in applauding Obey. Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) was excited that Section 8 housing received more money in the continuing resolution.

In addition, some members were content with the CR, for now, because it paid for all transportation projects, added money for community health centers and funded a program created in the 2005 energy bill to provide loan guarantees for alternative-fuel programs. In addition, all of the Army Corps of Engineers' water projects will be funded. The projects initially were funded as earmarks, but Obey reached a deal with the Corps and the Office of Management and Budget to pay for the projects.