

National Legislative Division Weekly

HOUSE PASSES MILITARY CONSTRUCTION-VA BILL

[\[From Roll Call\]](#)

The House passed its first fiscal 2024 spending bill Thursday, funding veterans benefits and military construction projects, by a razor-thin margin along party lines that signaled a troubled road ahead for the appropriations process.

The \$317.4 billion Military Construction-VA bill, usually considered the least controversial of the 12 annual spending measures, passed on a 219-211 vote. Democrats marched in lockstep against the bill, saying it was chock-full of extremist policy riders and would cut military housing money needed by troops and their families.

Republicans [Ken Buck](#) of Colorado and [Tim Burchett](#) of Tennessee were the only two GOP "no" votes. And in another sign of trouble, House GOP leaders abandoned plans to take up their \$25.3 billion Agriculture bill this week after the party's hard-right faction demanded more spending cuts. Instead, the House was preparing to leave town Thursday afternoon for the long August recess having passed only one of the 12 bills needed by Oct. 1, when the new fiscal year begins.

After the Military-Construction-VA bill passed, Majority Leader [Steve Scalise](#), R-La., announced on the floor that Friday votes would be canceled, and the chamber would start its August recess after the last Thursday afternoon vote series.

Minority Whip [Katherine M. Clark](#), D-Mass., said it was irresponsible to leave town without taking up additional spending bills.

"Now the Republican conference is saying they are sending us home for six weeks without funding the government? That we have one bill, one bill out of 12 completed, because extremists are holding your conference hostage," Clark said to applause from her Democratic colleagues. "We will have 12 days when we return to fund the government. ... This is a reckless march to a MAGA shutdown." Scalise replied that negotiations would continue during the August recess "to make sure we get back to funding the priorities of the nation."

'Pretty serious challenge'

House leadership is preliminarily planning to prioritize the Agriculture, Defense, Energy-Water and State-Foreign Operations appropriations bills when the chamber returns from recess, sources familiar with the talks say.

Leadership and appropriators are also aiming to finish the committee's markups early in the month, with the Labor-HHS-Education and Commerce-Justice-Science bills the final two the committee needs to finish.

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House Republican leadership faced pressure from both sides of the conference on the Agriculture bill this week. House Freedom Caucus members sought deeper cuts, and moderates like Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., said the potential additional spending cuts were “a big factor” causing some to oppose the bill.

Moderates also had concerns about anti-abortion policy riders, Lawler said.

“We stopped it from coming from the floor, because they don’t have the votes for it,” Lawler said. “That was a result of conversations that we had.”

Financial Services Appropriations Chairman [Steve Womack](#), R-Ark., said this week's events were a negative sign for what's to come in September.

“The fact we can’t bring [Agriculture] to the floor, tells me we have 11 more bills that are going to be a pretty serious challenge for us,” Womack said. “Or shutdown. And I pray that we don’t go into that territory.”

Members of the hard-right Freedom Caucus are pushing to pare back spending to the fiscal 2022 level and eliminate about \$115 billion in spending that the House Appropriations Committee would pay for by clawing back unspent funds in pandemic aid and other laws.

That effort would require chopping an additional \$7.5 billion from the Agriculture bill, which would face resistance from centrist Republicans in swing districts. Democrats estimate that funding for programs in the Agriculture bill would be reduced to levels last seen in fiscal 2007 under that scenario.

Womack said that he had been asked to cut an additional \$3 billion from his bill, a request he said he “stood down on.” Any additional cuts to his bill will have to happen through regular order, he said.

Senate contrast

Across the Capitol, bipartisanship ruled in the Senate Appropriations Committee, which was completing work on all 12 of its bills, despite a last-minute hiccup on the Homeland Security measure.

Unlike their House counterparts, Senate appropriators agreed to write their bills based on the bipartisan spending levels set in last month’s debt limit suspension law. Using those levels ensured bipartisan cooperation in the committee.

In quick order, the panel approved its Defense bill on a 27-1 vote, followed by its Interior-Environment bill (28-0), its Labor-HHS-Education bill (26-2), and finally its Homeland Security bill (24-4). The other eight bills were approved in previous weeks.

Although it drew more bipartisan opposition, even the Homeland Security bill got through fairly easily. Panel leaders were able to defuse a bubbling sticking point by pledging to work with Sen. [Bill Hagerty](#), R-

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Tenn., on his proposal to shift funding from migrant shelter and services accounts to removal and detention programs.

“These are serious, bipartisan bills that can actually be signed into law,” Senate Appropriations Chair [Patty Murray](#), D-Wash., said at the markup Thursday. By passing the bills, she said, “We are sending a message to the American people that we are taking our responsibility seriously to keep our government funded.”

September crunch

But the monthlong August recess virtually ensures there is no longer enough time to complete fiscal 2024 appropriations by Oct. 1, given that the full Senate has yet to take up any of its bills and the House passed only one.

The Senate now has only four weeks in September to make headway on appropriations, and the House is scheduled to be in session only 12 days that month unless plans change.

Speaker [Kevin McCarthy](#), R-Calif., and Senate Majority Leader [Charles E. Schumer](#), D-N.Y., met Thursday to discuss the appropriations process. McCarthy said he asked Schumer to “get into conference early before Sept. 30 so we can try to get this done.”

And finding a compromise between the House and Senate bills will be a heavy lift because of wide disparities in funding levels.

Even at the House's starting point before any further cuts negotiated by hard-right conservatives, the gap between the two chambers may top \$70 billion, after a bipartisan Senate deal to add more emergency funds on top of additional money informally agreed to in the debt ceiling deal. If House conservatives get their way, that gap could approach \$190 billion.

Womack said Congress has “real issues” moving forward in the appropriations process, and said he is worried about a potential shutdown.

“I don’t know what’s going to transpire in the next 45 days, that is going to dramatically change the landscape in a more positive way,” he said. “I just don’t see that happening.”

A stopgap funding measure will be required in September to avoid a partial government shutdown even if a few of the regular bills can be enacted on time.

House Appropriations ranking member [Rosa DeLauro](#), D-Conn., said Thursday that Republicans might pursue an across-the-board cut in a continuing resolution, which she said would lead to a shutdown.

The Military Construction-VA bill is one of only a few that Republicans spared from cuts, and even the hard-right Freedom Caucus largely left it alone. More than half of the bill is made up of mandatory benefit programs for veterans, and the discretionary portion, \$155.7 billion, is mainly for VA health care.

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But the usually noncontroversial measure triggered a firestorm of protests after Republicans insisted on culture-war provisions that included banning funding for gender-affirming care, abortion access and training programs designed to encourage diversity and inclusion, among other things.

And Democrats also took aim at a \$17.5 billion military construction budget that was about \$1.5 billion lower than this year's enacted level. That included eliminating funding for the cleanup of so-called forever chemicals used in household products, known as PFAS.

Republicans said the military construction budget was nonetheless \$800 million more than President Joe Biden had requested.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

It is now recess for both the House and the Senate! Be on the lookout for Congressional town halls in your area – start by checking your member of Congress's website for any information.

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

Chris Yates, California

This week, we are excited to recognize Chris Yates from the Department of California for sharing The American Legion's legislative agenda in meetings with the offices of Representatives Young Kim (R-CA-40), Michelle Steel (R-CA-45), and Mike Levin (D-CA-49).

Thank you, Mr. Yates!

If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at jkamin@legion.org.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

There will be no hearings as both Chambers of Congress are home for the August recess.