

Congress wrestles with budget to satisfy everyone

By Geoff Earle and Hans Nichols

Amid signs that Congress might not be able to act before the April 15th statutory deadline, Senate and House Republican leaders struggled Tuesday to craft a budget compromise that would satisfy the White House and the party's two opposing wings.

"We need as large a budget package as possible," said Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) as lawmakers came under heavy pressure from the White House to approve the budget measure before Congress adjourns for the spring recess on Friday. "We'll get it done before the recess."

However, GOP centrists were holding out for a \$350 billion, 10-year tax cut that is half of what the president requested, which they said was the most they could accept at a time when budget deficits are reaching record heights.

Although Congress has often failed to pass its budget on time in recent years, Republicans skewered Senate Democrats for failing to enact a budget when they were in the majority last year.

"The bodies have spoken, and now it's time for people in both bodies to come to some sort of compromise," said Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), the GOP Conference chairman.

But when asked whether Republicans could pass a budget this week, Santorum

acknowledged, "If we had the votes, I wouldn't be out here saying we're still talking about it."

Meanwhile, in the House, conservatives circulated two letters demanding that the House-Senate conference committee include the president's tax cut of \$726 billion.

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A total of 29 House members signed a Republican Study Group (RSG) letter to Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), announcing their intention to oppose a budget resolution if it provides only \$350 billion in tax cuts.

A second letter, organized by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-Colo.) and signed by 25 conservatives — many the same who signed the RSG letter — went even further by threatening to oppose the final bill if it does not include the full amount requested by the president.

"It is our duty to make the tough decisions today and not put them off for another day," the letter stated. "Therefore, it is our intention to oppose any conference report on the budget that fails to fully enact the tax cuts supported by President Bush."

Despite that strong language, some House conservatives claimed to be open to compromise with the Senate and drew a distinction between them and what they said were a few intransigent Senate moderates.

Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.), leader of the RSG, said, "What is astounding to me and

many of my colleagues is that some in the Senate want the House to compromise and increase spending, but then turn around and say that the number for the economic growth package has to be their number. This is not how we should produce a budget resolution."

Yet other conservatives were clearly eager to vote against the budget if they don't get their way.

"A lot of conservatives could quickly become deficit hawks and vote against this budget," Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.) said. "We'll just have to go down finding our way in the dark, which is what the budget process is without a budget."

"We really need the White House to engage in a much more satisfactory way," added Pence, noting that he understood the president is preoccupied by the war.

With such positioning by conservative and centrists, congressional leaders in both chambers continued to prepare themselves for the possibility that a budget resolution would not be passed this week.

But a spokesman for the House Budget Committee claimed that the substance of the budget is more important than the timing. "If we miss the deadline, it's not like anything happens," said Sean Spicer. "It doesn't help the legislative process."

In the Senate, Republican leaders turned their attention to two key Democrats — Sens. John Breaux (La.) and Ben Nelson (Neb.) after failing to persuade Sens. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) to back away from a \$350 billion tax cut ceiling.

Frist and Sen. Don Nickles (R-Okla.) met with Breaux and Nelson on Tuesday, but failed to reach a deal, although further meetings were expected at press time.

Nelson has repeatedly stressed that the composition of the tax cut is more important to him than any specific number, while emphasizing he favored tax cuts like relief to cash-strapped states. But after meeting with Frist, he said that \$350 billion is still the operative number in the Senate.

Told that many House conservatives are insisting on the \$726 billion tax cut number approved by the House, Nelson replied, "The blood will be on their hands. If it's all or nothing, you've got to take nothing."