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New Shutdown Deadline Looms on March 1; Government Spending Bills Too Big for Lawmakers to Handle

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House Republicans have made a lot of noise about breaking Washington's habit of relying on an end-of-year, colossal catchall spending bill to fund the federal government, but they have made little progress in finishing the work.

After three stopgap bills to avert shutdowns and lingering disagreements over spending, passing all 12 annual spending bills one by one appears impossible.

Yet House Speaker Mike Johnson and his Republican conference's band of archconservatives stand firmly in their quest. Complicating matters, the Republicans' majority is down to two seats with the loss of a New York district in a special election last week.

The Republican-led House has passed seven of the annual spending bills. The Democratic-led Senate has passed three. Neither chamber has approved or even considered spending legislation since November.

The House is on a two-week recess. When lawmakers return on Feb. 28, they will have only three working days to approve emergency spending legislation to prevent a partial government shutdown at midnight on March 1. House Majority Whip Tom Emmer of Minnesota has said Republican leaders won't consider any stopgap spending bills.

When the Senate returns from its recess, it must deal with the impeachment trial of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas before senators can take up any other legislation, such as spending bills.

The deadlines offer an uncertain scenario for President Biden's annual State of the Union address, scheduled for March 7. The prime-time speech won't be held in the event of a shutdown.

The spending predicament is not entirely unusual, but the shutdown deadlines are arising more frequently.

Congress hasn't passed all required annual spending bills on time since 1997. That was only the fourth time Congress completed its spending job on time since the current system was adopted in 1977, according to the Pew Research Center.

Why is it the Washington norm to rely on stopgap bills and hulking catchall spending bills that lawmakers complain are too big to read?

Chris Edwards, an economist for the libertarian Cato Institute, said government spending has become too bloated for lawmakers to handle.

Lawmakers do not have enough time to parse through regular spending duties such as defense and the 2,400 benefit programs the federal government has amassed, he said.

“The federal budget has grown far too large to properly manage with any amount of efficiency or sober judgment,” Mr. Edwards said.

Republicans would likely reject any attempt to put an omnibus bill on the House floor.

“We’ve got to pass these bills individually,” said Rep. John Rutherford, Florida Republican. “I do not want to do a minibus or an omnibus. We put them together, and let’s run them through. That’s the way it’s supposed to work.”

The alternatives to an omnibus also are not ideal for House Republicans. Mr. Johnson, Louisiana Republican, still supports passing spending bills one at a time but has floated a yearlong stopgap bill that would trigger an automatic 1% across-the-board cut in spending in April. Lawmakers fear that would kneecap defense spending. Another outcome would be a partial shutdown, as the House Freedom Caucus has threatened. Members are demanding votes on spending bills one by one. Members say they are losing faith in Mr. Johnson and his leadership team to stick to that principle.

“I think they’ve abandoned ship,” said Rep. Andrew Ogles, Tennessee Republican. “I think they’re going to break regular order in order to get the same old, same old passed again.”

Using a shutdown as a cudgel should not be a surprise because the far-right conservatives likely would refuse to vote for an omnibus anyway, said Molly Reynolds, who studies spending issues in Congress for the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution.

Ms. Reynolds said the perennial appropriations process has become a battleground to score political points amid increased polarization. An omnibus can be a way to smooth over some of the divisions.

“It’s helpful to keep in mind that probably what we’re driving towards is an omnibus,” she said. “Part of why omnibuses can be attractive is because some of the individual divisions, some of the individual bills get subsumed into the bigger bill.”

Breaking that cycle would require taking a hatchet to the “swollen mass” of government programs and bureaucracies, said David Ditch, a policy analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

“Streamlining the federal government would not only help move the budget closer to balance, but it would also dramatically simplify the spending process,” Mr. Ditch wrote in an analysis of Congress’ cycle of government shutdowns.

While House lawmakers say they want to push forth with spending legislation, the Senate has virtually ground to a halt.

“I don’t think we will do them one at a time, but my hope is that we would package them in bunches as we’ve done in the past,” said Sen. Christopher Murphy, Connecticut Democrat. Others see limited options.

Sen. John Kennedy, Louisiana Republican, said Congress likely has just two choices to get through the current fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30: a yearlong stopgap bill or an omnibus spending bundle.

“I think it’s two doors: door No. 2, door No. 2. That’s it,” Mr. Kennedy said.