



No One Knows What \$5.7 Billion in Border Wall Funding Would Pay For

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January 25, 2019

As the U.S. federal government shutdown continues for over a month, President Donald Trump continues to demand \$5.7 billion in funding for a border wall, and Democrats have similarly dug in their heels by denying his request. The resulting impact of the impasse keeps the federal government closed and roughly 800,000 federal workers without a paycheck. Each side of the political aisle is happy to blame the other, but what seems to have been overlooked in all the rhetoric and anger is the fact that no one seems to know exactly what that \$5.7 billion would pay for.

‘234 Miles Of New Physical Barrier’

It helps to understand the evolution of this mystery by looking at the recent history of border security spending. In March 2018, Trump signed \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill that earmarked \$1.6 billion for border security. However, that money was designated to be spent on existing and border security projects and not on new construction. According to *USA Today*, approximately 654 miles of the US Mexico border has some sort of fence in place. This includes 280 miles of vehicle barriers, which are reinforced with 20 miles of pedestrian barriers in some areas. There are also about 374 miles of just pedestrian fencing. Some of that omnibus money, approximately \$1.4 billion, went to U.S. Customs and Border Protection to build and replace about 82 miles of barriers in several locations.

Considering that much of the money allocated for border security since Trump’s election has gone essentially towards border fencing maintenance, it’s understandable that he is demanding additional money from Congress for new barriers to be built. It’s hard to determine exactly when the figure of \$5.7 billion came into existence, but it was made formal in a two-page letter from Russell Vought, acting director of the Office of Management and Budget, to Congress in early January 2019. In that letter, he said that the funds would pay for “234 miles of new physical barrier.”

The Justification For The Price Tag

According to the *Washington Post*, Trump advisors said the administration wrote that letter after Democratic congressional aides asked Vice President Mike Pence for specifics on budget estimates for the Trump administration’s priorities. The letter did not include a budget or specific line items for the \$5.7 billion requested. In fact, as of the posting of this article, the Trump

administration has not provided any justification to Congress for the \$5.7 billion price tag for the proposed border wall.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, published an article on January 8, 2019, explaining how Vought's letter and the \$5.7 billion funding request meant construction costs would average \$24.4 million per mile of steel fencing. The Institute noted that the new OMB estimate is 41 percent more costly than the roughly \$17.3 million per mile construction costs estimated just a few years ago by DHS, 2.7 times as expensive as Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan's estimates, and five times as expensive as President Trump's lowest estimate.

Maintenance Of A Border Wall

The OMB request and per mile estimate does not include the large cost overruns that are typical for government construction projects. It is likely that Trump finally conceded to a steel barrier fence because a concrete border wall would have cost twice as much. The request also did not take into account the cost of maintaining a steel bollard fence, which averages approximately \$864,000 annually per mile for the existing border barrier. It would likely cost considerably more money per mile to maintain the border fence that Trump is proposing. Most notably, the Institute said in its report that if Trump's border wall is built for about \$24.3 million per mile, then it would be the first time that a large government construction project has come in at or below cost in a very long time.

The fundamental problem with the OMB's request to Congress is that the Trump administration still has not produced a line item budget or justification for the \$5.7 billion figure. Based off of Trump's public statements, one can assume that most, if not all, of it would go directly towards wall construction. However, if Trump intends for part of that to go towards funding for more Border Patrol personnel, drones, surveillance technology etc., that has not been made clear. If the administration actually knows how each dollar would be spent, it is also unclear why it has not shared this information with Congress. Until Democrats in Congress have a clear understanding of exactly where and how taxpayer dollars would be spent as part of a \$5.7 billion border wall and security package, it is likely they will continue to deny this funding.