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Todd J. Gillman column

Nov. 16--WASHINGTON -- Gov. Rick Perry, channeling his contempt for Washington into policy, called Tuesday for turning Congress into a part-time job at half the current pay.

The "uproot and overhaul" plan also would end life tenure for federal judges, require an overwhelming consensus to raise taxes and eliminate three Cabinet departments -- including the one Perry couldn't recall in last week's brain-freeze moment during a Republican presidential debate.

Railing against Congress is rarely bad politics. But analysts dismissed the plan as radical and impractical, an ideology-driven wish list that may or may not lure supporters back to a sinking campaign.

"Washington is too broken to be fixed by tinkering on the margins," Perry told a crowd in Bettendorf, Iowa, where he cast himself as the outsider needed to address "Beltway decay."

"I do not believe Washington needs a new coat of paint. It needs a complete overhaul."

Norm Ornstein, an expert on Congress and the federal government at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said Perry's vision goes far beyond standard small-government dogma.

"That might be wonderful if you could move the entire world back to the 19th century," he said, adding that much of the plan is "ludicrous. ... It's just pandering. It's all pandering."

Perry argued that cutting congressional salaries by half -- from \$174,000 for most House and Senate members -- would drive out "entrenched" and "out-of-touch" lawmakers, and transform the legislative branch into a "part-time, citizen Congress" that would do less harm.

He also would slash lawmakers' staffs, and dock pay by half whenever Congress fails to balance the budget -- raising the prospect of paychecks lopped by three-fourths.

Ornstein called such collective punishment "lunacy" that Congress, which sets its own pay under the Constitution, would never approve. If Perry somehow could overcome the

resistance, he added, "you'll very likely end up with a bunch of billionaires or multimillionaires" -- and a presidency that is vastly more powerful, with Congress absent for half the year.

"It's a radical direction. Real conservatives are uneasy about an accumulation of power," Ornstein said.

With the governor mired in low single digits in some polls, rival campaigns didn't bother critiquing his plan.

One top congressional Democrat said it didn't sound like a thoughtful approach to governing.

"If this is what he thinks is pandering to the tea party, it is not, in my opinion, speaking to the issues that the American public feels are very, very critical to them -- jobs being the No. 1 issue," House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland told reporters at the Capitol.

Perry, on Sean Hannity's radio show a few hours later, pushed back. "It's not a surprise to me ... that career politicians like Steny Hoyer don't like my plan to overhaul Washington. They're making a great living up there," he said.

The plan Perry laid out in Iowa included a number of proposals he has previously discussed, from capping federal spending at 18 percent of the nation's economic output, which could require hundreds of billions in annual spending cuts, to shifting lifetime judicial appointments into 18-year terms, an idea he embraced a year ago in his anti-Washington book, *Fed Up!*

But the proposal to turn Congress into a part-time body was new and eye-catching.

"Look, Texas is the 13th largest economy in the world. Our Legislature only meets for 140 days every other year. And we manage to get our work done," Perry told the Hannity audience.

But critics called that a naive view that reflects a deeply held animosity toward Washington and the fact that Perry has spent his entire political career in Texas.

"With all due respect, Governor Perry hasn't served in Congress," Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Lewisville, told KXAS-TV (Channel 5) in Dallas. "This isn't his area of expertise."

Ross Baker, a Rutgers University political scientist who studies Congress and the presidency, said Perry's "meat ax" push to weaken Congress and the federal government "represents a really radical attack," predicting that Perry "would run into a buzz saw."

Besides, he said, "the more that you diminish the members of Congress, the more you empower two groups that I can't imagine Rick Perry wants to empower -- bureaucrats and

lobbyists. ... It strikes me as a desperate effort to try to remain viable in the presidential race."

At the Libertarian-oriented Cato Institute, which advocates government downsizing, budget analyst Tad DeHaven said the plan had some commendable elements, such as privatizing mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

But on other points, he called it inconsistent.

Perry called for dismantling the Education Department, for instance, but he would still send federal school funds to local and state governments, albeit without restrictions. DeHaven cited similar flaws involving the Commerce and Energy departments.

"There's a big difference between eliminating a department and eliminating those functions contained in that department," DeHaven said.

As for cutting congressional pay and staff, he said, those ideas may "play well" but in the context of a nearly \$4 trillion federal budget, "there's no time to talk about pocket change like that."

"It looks to me that this is a response to his screw-up on TV," he said.

Some of the most venomous language in Perry's plan is aimed at the Transportation Security Administration, the agency created under President George W. Bush to beef up airport screening after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Perry would privatize the work of airport screening. His 24-page plan calls TSA a "costly and bureaucratic mess that has done more to demean travelers than secure our nation's transportation corridors."

House Transportation Chairman John Mica, R-Fla., also has pushed for privatization, and an aide called Perry's goal "realistic."

But Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, the senior Democrat on the Homeland Security Committee, warned against taking that path.

"The last time that the private sector was in charge, screening was inconsistent and lax," Thompson said Tuesday, arguing against a "loose, leave-it-to-the-private-sector approach."

Staff writer Tom Benning in Dallas contributed to this report.

At a glance: Perry's plan

Gov. Rick Perry's "Uproot & Overhaul Washington" plan would revamp the federal government. Some highlights:

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

Cut congressional pay in half and repeal the rules that prevent members of Congress from holding jobs in their home states and communities.

Until a balanced budget amendment is ratified by the states, support cutting congressional pay in half if Congress fails to propose a long-term balanced budget.

Criminalize insider trading by members of Congress.

Work with Congress to pass legislation requiring a two-thirds majority to pass any increase in taxes.

JUDICIAL BRANCH

End lifetime appointments of all federal judges, including Supreme Court justices.

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

Issue an immediate moratorium on all pending federal regulations, order a full audit of every regulation passed since 2008 and repeal any regulation that is not affordable, effective and appropriate.

Support legislation to automatically sunset federal regulations unless Congress votes to renew them.

Work with Congress to eliminate the Commerce, Education and Energy departments.

Transition the Transportation Security Administration to a public-private partnership.

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