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Black backs budget process reform

WASHINGTON - Republican Rep. Diane Black wants Congress to start 2012 by making major changes to the federal budget process.

Black, of Gallatin, and other Republicans on the House Budget Committee introduced a package of 10 budget reforms last week, including legislation that would bring back a modified version of a presidential power not used since the 1990s: the line-item veto.

The proposal, called "expedited rescission," is gaining momentum in the House. On Thursday, the Budget Committee approved the legislation, which is co-sponsored by the committee's chairman, Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and its ranking Democrat, Rep. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland.

The line-item veto isn't a new proposal. It was briefly granted to President Bill Clinton in 1996, but the Supreme Court struck it down in 1998 because the Constitution says the president may only sign or veto a bill — not pick it apart.

Backers say the new proposal skirts that problem because Congress, not the president, ultimately would decide what to cut. Under the measure, the president would have 45 days after a bill's passage to identify provisions he wanted removed

and send that request back to Congress for a yes or no vote.

Black, who voted to send the bill to the full House during a committee markup Thursday, said it would hold Congress accountable for wasteful provisions inserted into spending bills.

"This is obviously not a panacea to solve our spending problem or our budgetary issues," she said Friday. "What it does is it gives us one more tool in the toolbox."

Budget experts agree the line-item veto might help cut waste, but they want Congress to focus on developing a comprehensive budget plan — something the congressional debt-reduction "supercommittee" failed to do last month.

"At this point in the game, given the size of our budgetary problems, line-item vetoes and things like that aren't going to cut it," said Tad DeHaven, budget analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. "What we need specifically from Republicans is less

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generalities about needing to reform the budget ... and more specifics about what they want to cut."

Wasteful spending on special home-state projects — or earmarks — is less common than it used to be, but a line-item veto would still help root out any remaining pet projects from spending bills, said Maya MacGuineas, head of the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

"It is an elegant and useful tool to help remove items that shouldn't be in various bills, and it shines a light on the kinds of things that can get stuck in there at the dead of night," she said.

President Barack Obama generally supports the idea.

Meg Reilly, a spokeswoman for the Office of Management and Budget, said she couldn't name hypothetical line items the president might send back to Congress.

"But certainly anything that would qualify as an earmark or that has been identified by the administration recently as an area to reduce spending and cut government waste" could be targeted, she said.

Obama asked Congress to cut \$24 billion from discretionary spending programs in his fiscal 2012 budget.

Critics at Thursday's committee vote said the provision would hand too much power to the president.

"When I have a gun on my hip, it changes the nature of our conversation," said Republican Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma.

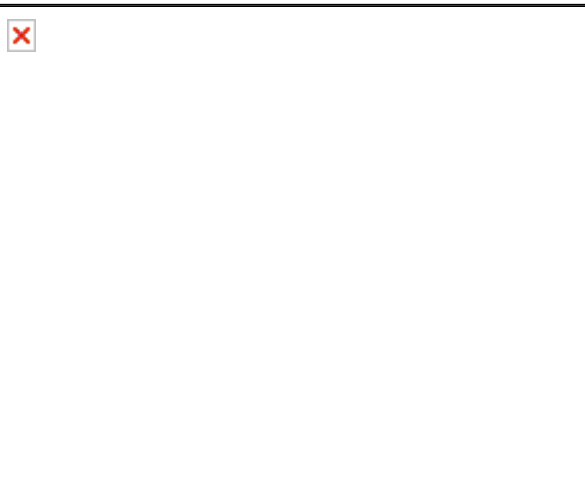
The same criticism has been leveled at another proposal sponsored by Black in the GOP's 10-bill package. That measure would require the annual budget to be passed as legislation by both houses of Congress and signed by the president. Currently, the budget passes as little more than a congressional resolution, making it easy for Congress to overspend, Black said.

Passing the budget as legislation would allow the president to veto it.

Black, one of Obama's critics, said both bills were written to give Congress final say over the budget.

Joshua Gordon, policy director at the Concord Coalition, a non-partisan group that advocates responsible fiscal policy, said having Congress and the president agree up front on a budget would avoid

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last-minute negotiations and government-shutdown threats that have become almost routine in Washington.

"If spending amounts are agreed to ahead of time, you're not fighting it out over individual appropriations bills," he said. "You wouldn't have the same sort of appropriations standoff that we've had over the last three years."

Black's office said the Budget Committee plans to take up the remaining budget measures early next year.

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