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Marco Rubio joins push to pass Obama's \$2 billion Zika request

Blasts fellow GOP for being stingy

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Just two months after running as one of the conservative candidates in the GOP presidential race, Sen. Marco Rubio is now embracing Democrats' calls to open the federal checkbook and dole out billions of dollars in money to combat the Zika virus — and tacking it onto the debt.

Mr. Rubio, whose home state of Florida is at risk of a serious outbreak, is co-sponsoring legislation to fully fund President Obama's nearly \$2 billion emergency spending request, and blasted his fellow Republicans for being too stingy by demanding more proof and more controls.

And Mr. Rubio, who is finishing out his first term then ditching the Senate at the end of this year, said if the new spending can be offset, that's fine. But he's also fine with tacking it onto the debt and leaving it for others to pay for.

“In times of public health emergencies, just like natural disasters, we shouldn't delay acting while we figure out and try to agree on what we're going to cut from other parts of the budget,” he said in a floor speech last week.

Mr. Rubio gives Democrats political cover as Congress prepares to fight this week over the mosquito-borne Zika virus, which health experts say hasn't had a breakout in the U.S. yet, but fear one is looming as the summer heats up.

The House GOP released its own plan Monday that would allocate \$622 million toward Zika, taking the money from existing Ebola money and elsewhere.

Senate negotiators, meanwhile, have reached the outlines of a \$1.1 billion plan — a little more than half of Mr. Obama's \$1.9 billion request — without finding any cuts to offset it elsewhere. Sen. John Cornyn, Texas Republican, has his own alternative that takes money from an Obamacare prevention fund to pay for the new spending.

Democrats are likely to oppose that, and then the pressure will be on Republicans to either cave and spend the money without offsets, or to hold firm.

Mr. Rubio's vote will be closely watched.

“They say all politics is local, but parochialism is not excuse for reckless spending,” Heritage Action spokesman Dan Holler said. “It is possible to address these things in a fiscally response

manner. In this particular case, more than \$2 billion in Ebola money remains that can be used to fight the Zika virus. There is no excuse for not using existing funds.”

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said vulnerable states can raise their own funding to combat the threat.

“Senator Rubio’s inclination to deficit-spend for his home state illustrates why we have a half trillion dollar deficit — self-interest nearly always trumps restraint when it comes to the budget,” he said.

Mr. Rubio is reaching for new spending just two months after he was bounced from the Republican presidential race by businessman Donald Trump. On the campaign trail, Mr. Rubio said the American dream is dying due to Mr. Obama’s economic policies, and “because Congress has spent us into unprecedented debt.”

“Make no mistake: if we change nothing, we are going to have a debt crisis in this country,” he said during a January speech in Sarasota, Florida. “It is going to destroy jobs. It is going to disrupt the function of our government.”

Now, Mr. Rubio is sponsoring three different proposals — his \$1.9 billion request, the bipartisan \$1.1 billion plan and the Cornyn plan that contains offsets.

Rep. Vern Buchanan, another Florida Republican, last week became the first member of the House GOP to back Mr. Obama’s request, and Gov. Rick Scott personally lobbied for funding on Capitol Hill in meetings last week, without publicly naming a dollar figure.

“Sometimes the needs of one’s home state weigh more heavily on members than their party’s position,” said Molly E. Reynolds, a fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution.

Also, she said, “the fact that Rubio is not running for re-election might also play a role here — because he won’t be in office after November, he may not feel as compelled to hew to the GOP party line.”