



Congressional Conferees Miss Informal Budget-Deal Deadline

By Cathy Burke

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A panel of House and Senate lawmakers trying to craft a bipartisan budget deal to avoid another government shutdown Jan. 15 reportedly missed its first informal deadline Monday.

The lawmakers last met three weeks ago, and have no meetings scheduled before their formal Dec. 13 deadline for a fiscal blueprint, the Washington Times reported.

Congressional members who will translate the budget into individual spending bills had pushed for a Dec. 2 deadline, saying that if they didn't have top-line numbers by then, they'd be hard-pressed to pass stand-alone bills before Jan. 15, when funding runs out for many federal programs, the Times reported.

"There is no question that the budget conference should be moving at a faster pace," Maryland Democratic Rep. Chris Van Hollen, one of the lead budget negotiators, told the Times.

"House appropriators asked for a deal 'by Dec. 2 at the latest' — and yet, almost seven weeks later, we still don't have an agreement," he said. "This is simply unacceptable."

Van Hollen told the newspaper that if Congress fails to produce a budget "that replaces the job-killing sequester, American families and businesses will be left to pay the price."

Republicans have ruled out any tax increases, and Democrats say they won't allow any major entitlement cuts, leaving little room to bridge the gap between the House GOP budget and the Senate Democrats' blueprint for 2014 spending, the newspaper noted.

The appropriators have two options, Richard Kogan, a senior fellow at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, told the Times.

The first is to write bills at the previous year's funding levels and then add money once a final budget deal is struck. The other is to ask for an extension past the Jan. 15 deadline.

One analyst speculated on a third option: passage of a short-term budget bill, called a continuing

resolution, capped at previous spending limits for the rest of fiscal 2014.

"I don't think that the committee will agree to anything, and I think they'll just end up doing another continuing resolution in January," Chris Edwards, editor of DownsizingGovernment.org at the Cato Institute, told the newspaper.

The Friday, Dec. 13, deadline is nominal for budget conferees.

House Budget Chairman Paul D. Ryan, R-Wis., and Senate Budget Chairwoman Patty Murray, D-Wash., agree total failure is not an option, **Roll Call reported** Monday.

The blog reported the pair are inching toward an agreement of modest scope lasting more than 20 months — the halfway point between the 2014 midterms and the next presidential election.

The main provision would be a partial easing of the next two spending sequesters — not only the automatic curbs set to take effect Jan. 15 but also the round of reductions set to start next October, the blog reported.