

The Washington Times

First deadline missed in talks to avoid shutdown

By: Jacqueline Klimas – December 3, 2013

The congressional negotiators trying to write a budget to avoid another partial shutdown next month missed their first informal deadline Monday.

It has been nearly three weeks since the 29-member committee of House and Senate budget negotiators met, and they don't have any meetings scheduled before their final Dec. 13 deadline.

The lawmakers who will have to translate the budget into individual spending bills had pushed for an even earlier Dec. 2 deadline, saying if they didn't have top-line numbers by then, they would struggle to pass the stand-alone bills before the mid-January shutdown deadline.

But Monday came and went with no new announcements.

"There is no question that the budget conference should be moving at a faster pace. 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," said Rep. Chris Van Hollen, Maryland Democrat and one of the lead budget negotiators. "This is simply unacceptable. 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 Senate Democrats' blueprint for 2014 spending.

Without agreement on final numbers, the spending committees were writing their bills to entirely different levels.

Now, the appropriators have two options, said Richard Kogan, senior fellow at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

The first is to write bills at the previous year's level and then add more money later once a final budget deal is struck. The other option is to ask for a short extension past the Jan. 15 deadline when current government funding expires. That would give Congress more time to write the final bills.

One analyst, however, has a third scenario: the negotiators fail to find a compromise and instead pass 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," said Chris Edwards, editor of DownsizingGovernment.org at the Cato Institute.

He went on to say that Jan. 15 is the only deadline that matters, since the risk of another government shutdown then would push Congress to act.

The Dec. 13 deadline, on the other hand, holds no consequences if missed.

Appropriations Committee members prefer to write individual bills because it gives them more control over where the money goes. Without individual spending bills past spending issues - like leftover funds or a one-time boost - get carried over into future spending plans, even though the money could be redirected, Mr. Kogan said.

While Mr. Kogan could not speculate on which route Congress will take, he did say he thinks another shutdown is "an unlikely possibility."