



With a week to next shutdown, no obvious progress on budget, DACA bills

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WASHINGTON – With a week to go before the budget expires, and Congress not meeting again until Monday, there is little outward sign of progress on spending or DACA bills that could head off the next government shutdown.

But officials were optimistic Thursday that a deal would get done – if only to keep from looking like “squabbling children,” in the words of one expert.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, at a Republican retreat at the Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., said Thursday that negotiators are making progress toward another continuing resolution – the short-term budget extension that keeps the government open in place of a formal budget.

And Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said at the same event that he is confident there will not be another shutdown, citing an old Kentucky country expression that there is “no education in the second kick of a mule.”

That was a reference to the three-day government shutdown that began when the Senate was unable to pass a new continuing resolution Jan. 19, when the last resolution expired and the government ran out of money.

Democrats were holding out at the time to get a vote on a bill to replace Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program that defers deportation of some 800,000 immigrants who were brought to this country illegally as children. President Donald Trump has ordered the program to end March 5.

The budget stalemate ended on Jan. 22, and the Senate passed a continuing resolution through Feb. 8, after Democrats said they won a commitment from McConnell to bring a DACA bill to a vote. The next continuing resolution would be the fifth for this fiscal year, which began Oct. 1.

Chris Edwards, an economist at the Cato Institute, said “immigration has been one of the sticking points” in congressional negotiations, but he believes they will eventually reach a compromise to avoid a shutdown.

“Shutdowns create newspaper headlines that members of Congress are sort of like squabbling children and they’re not getting their jobs done,” Edwards said. “I don’t think anybody wants

that, so I think that's the impetus for them to get a deal, is that they can at least show the public that they're making the budget process work in Washington."

Theresa Cardinal Brown, director of immigration and cross-border policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center, said she's not so sure a deal can be made.

"Where we stand right now, honestly on the immigration stuff, I don't believe they're going to have a final resolution by Feb. 8, and it appears that there may be an effort actually to decouple the immigration conversation from the continuing resolution," Brown said.

But she said discussions continue between lawmakers and their staff, even though the Republicans are on retreat this week.

"It's a little bit of a fallacy that when Congress isn't here that everything stops," Brown said. "That's not true. The staffs continue to talk ... members are continuing to talk as well."

A Senate Democratic aide confirmed that a bipartisan group of members continues to meet on the issue of immigration, saying they are making good progress. And McConnell said Thursday that he is willing to bring up immigration, "provided the government is still open on Feb. 8 ... and we'll see who can get to 60 votes."

Edwards said part of the problem in negotiations is a lack of trust between Republicans and Democrats. He said this dynamic leads Democrats to worry over empty promises.

"Trust is an issue here. Often politicians will say, 'If we get your vote on this then we promise we will help you with that down the road,'" Edwards said. "The two parties don't seem to trust each other much these days, which is one of the problems, why the trains don't run on time in the budget process as they used to."

While Brown said she is not optimistic that Congress can head off another shutdown, she also knows that anything can happen in Washington.

"I never lay odds on Congress because just when you think all is lost, something could happen, and just when you think it all comes together, it all falls apart," she said. "And that has happened more times than I can count when it comes to immigration."