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Congressional Leaders Continue Work on Economic Relief Efforts Through April

APRIL 10, 2020 – 3:30 PM

Soon after the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) became law, Congress began discussions of additional legislative packages to address the coronavirus pandemic. Initial discussions contemplated an infrastructure package. However, leadership has shifted focus to improving the CARES Act, with bipartisan, bicameral acknowledgment that the CARES Act-created Payroll Protection Program (PPP) requires a second infusion of funding.

There were reports earlier this week that Senators Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Chuck Schumer (D-NY) were working together through the Senate recess to come to a bipartisan agreement to address dire funding needs. As a result, on Thursday morning, in pro forma session, Senator McConnell requested unanimous consent to adopt a \$251 billion proposal for additional funding for the PPP. Without having negotiated any additional provisions to this proposal with Republican leadership, Senators Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) then asked to amend Senator McConnell's bill with a Democratic proposal that would have added \$100 billion for hospitals and community health centers, \$150 billion for state and local governments, and a 15 percent increase to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Senator McConnell objected to Senator Cardin's amendment as this had not been part of the originally negotiated proposal. Senator Cardin objected to Senator McConnell's original proposal, delaying passage of any additional measures until a compromise can be reached.

As was seen in CARES Act negotiations, the failed vote spurred partisan rhetoric and open frustration in Congress. Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) stated that Democrat's demands are a good-faith effort to disburse money where it is needed most urgently. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) accused Democrats of playing politics with small business aid after delaying a vote on the original package in the Senate Thursday morning. He also repeatedly rejected various Democratic policy proposals in ongoing relief talks, including relief for clean energy companies and election reform to allow voting by mail.

As both chambers of Congress stand in recess, unanimous consent to legislative actions is a procedural tool that allows legislators to stay away from the Senate or House Floors while still passing measures to provide relief and assistance to Americans. While useful in a time of physical distancing, one legislator's objection can block a unanimous consent vote. Thus, successful, unblocked unanimous consent proposals often reflect the negotiated agreements made in bipartisan talks before leadership brings the proposal to the floor. Legislation that does not reflect bipartisan compromise is especially difficult to pass in both chambers through unanimous consent.

The Senate stands adjourned until the next pro forma session (a brief meeting of the Senate) scheduled for Monday morning, April 13. Another session is also scheduled for Thursday, April 16, though they can adjust that schedule as needed should a compromise be reached. Negotiations will likely continue over the weekend in the hopes of reaching an agreement soon, as both parties are interested in providing additional relief to the nation.

Following what may be several smaller bills to address technical issues and funding shortfalls from the CARES Act, Congress will likely turn its attention to legislation intended to jump-start the economy following the coronavirus crisis and get Americans back to work. Congressional Committees with jurisdiction over the nation's infrastructure are formulating a package, and proposals are likely to surface in the coming weeks.