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In Congress, the GOP Embraces Its Spending Side

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GOP leaders this week sent House Republicans home for the summer with some political tips, helpfully laid out in 12 "Ideas for August Recess Events." Drop by a military reserve center to highlight increased benefits, the talking points suggest. Visit a bridge or highway that will receive additional funding, or talk up the new prescription drug benefit for seniors.

Having skirted budget restraints and approved nearly \$300 billion in new spending and tax breaks before leaving town, Republican lawmakers are now determined to claim full credit for the congressional spending. Far from shying away from their accomplishments, lawmakers are embracing the pork, including graffiti eradication in the Bronx, \$277 million in road projects for Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), and a \$200,000 deer-avoidance system in New York.

When the year started, President Bush made spending restraint a mantra, laying out an austere budget that would freeze non-security discretionary spending for five years and setting firm cost limits on transportation and energy bills. But now, as Congress fills in the details of the budget plan, there is little interest in making deep cuts and enormous pressure to spend.

Lawmakers have seen little to fear from a political backlash, some acknowledge, and Bush has yet to wield his veto pen. In fact, the White House has proved itself largely unable to overcome the institutional forces that have long driven lawmakers to ply their parochial interests with cash.

When lawmakers return in the fall, they are almost certain to vote for more tax cuts. They also will vote on a huge new defense spending bill. But proposals for cutting entitlement programs including Medicaid have yet to pick up much support.

"If you look at fiscal conservatism these days, it's in a sorry state," said Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), one of only eight House members to vote against the \$286.5 billion transportation bill that was passed the day before the recess. "Republicans don't even pretend anymore."

Last week, Congress approved transportation and energy bills that burst through the president's cost limits. Annual spending bills are inching above caps set by Congress itself in its budget plan for 2006. And a massive water projects bill passed by the House last month authorizes spending that would exceed current levels by 173 percent.

"You have to be courageous to not spend money," said Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), "and we don't have many people who have that courage."

Indeed, Congress has exceeded the allocations or assumptions in its budget resolution four times -- and the year's legislative work is far from complete. According to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, those budget violations have raised spending through 2010 by roughly \$2.2

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billion above Congress's limits and tacked \$115 billion onto the federal budget deficit through the end of decade, including \$33 billion in 2006 alone.

That \$33 billion may be tantamount to a rounding error in a \$2.6 trillion budget, but it is 10 percent of the \$333 billion budget deficit the White House has forecast for the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30.

"There's a rising level of frustration with the disconnect between where the vast majority of conservatives are in this country and how Congress is behaving," said former representative Pat Toomey (R-Pa.), whose Club for Growth political action committee finances the campaigns of conservative candidates. "There's going to be a wake-up call sooner or later."

For now, Congress and the White House are locked in a pattern of skirting their own constraints. In 2004, Bush demanded that no highway bill exceed \$256 billion. Under pressure, he increased his limit to \$284 billion this year. Congress responded with a five-year, \$286.5 billion measure, but even that figure may be deceptive, Flake warned. The bill actually authorizes expenditures of \$295 billion but assumes that, on the last day of the bill's life, Congress will rescind \$8.5 billion in unused funds.

"Nobody believes that's going to happen," Flake said. "It's frankly a pretty transparent gimmick."

Bush set a firm cost limit of \$6.7 billion for tax breaks in the energy bill. Congress then approved breaks worth \$11.5 billion over 10 years in an energy bill that will cost \$12.3 billion overall. In late June, the White House hastily requested an additional \$975 million to finance unanticipated veterans' health care costs for 2005. The Senate responded with \$1.5 billion.

So far, Congress has completed only two of 13 annual spending bills, but both -- one primarily financing the Interior Department, the other funding Congress -- busted lawmakers' prescribed spending caps, by \$134 million. The House and Senate have passed spending plans for the departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education that exceed Bush's request by billions.

And on July 14, the House overwhelmingly approved a major water bill that authorizes projects worth \$10.3 billion over 10 years -- \$4.4 billion in the first five. In 2000, Congress approved a similar act worth a fraction of that, \$1.6 billion over five years.

To fiscal conservatives, it is not just the total cost of the bills but also their content. Covering 1,752 pages, the highway bill is the most expensive public works legislation in U.S. history, complete with 6,376 earmarked projects, according to the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense. Kern County, Calif., home of powerful House Ways and Means Chairman Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R), snagged \$722 million in projects, or nearly \$1,000 per person. Los Angeles County, with clogged highways and 10 million people, will receive barely \$60 per resident.

Even before the bill was signed, Kane County, Ill., leaders showed their faith in Speaker Hastert last week by unveiling blueprints for a \$120 million bridge, to be financed largely by the federal government.

This week, House GOP leaders sent their legislators 52 pages of talking points, some addressing fiscal discipline, others touting the spending. The final page lays out 12 "Ideas for August Recess Events," none of which trumpets small government.

Sean M. Spicer, a spokesman for House Republican Conference Chairman Deborah Pryce (Ohio), said lawmakers have nothing to be ashamed of. House appropriators have recommended that 101 federal

programs be terminated, at a savings of \$4.6 billion. And House members have pushed their Senate colleagues to stay pretty close to the budget limits.

The highway bill means jobs, he said. The energy bill addresses a pressing national interest, and no one is going to complain about additional funding for veterans' health care, he added.

"With Congress unable to keep its pocketbook pocketed, it would be nice if President Bush could be counted upon to cast his first vetoes on bills so richly deserving of them," the editors of the conservative National Review wrote yesterday.

But administration officials counter that the bills could have been far worse. An energy bill worked out by House and Senate negotiators in 2003 would have cost more than twice as much as the current version.

"It should be signed," said Deputy Energy Secretary Clay Sell. "It's the best energy bill that can be passed."

The highway bill initially proposed in the House would have cost \$88 billion more than the final version.

"The president's insistence on spending restraint resulted in both the highway and energy bills coming in far less than originally proposed by Congress," said Scott Milburn, spokesman for the White House budget office.

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