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'Operation Offset' aims to cut transportation fat

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Conservative Republicans this week will present a spending-cut plan to help offset the billions needed to rebuild the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast that would eliminate some of the 6,000 congressional pet projects tucked inside the massive transportation bill.

Some Republican critics of congressional spending also suggested delaying President Bush's prescription-drug plan to roll back some of the \$331 billion deficit, which includes \$62.3 billion for hurricane relief.

Rep. Mike Pence, Indiana Republican, said yesterday that lawmakers will have to take a "really hard look" at delaying the Jan. 1 implementation of the prescription-drug entitlement, which he says would put \$40 billion back into the budget.

"We simply can't allow a catastrophe of nature to become a catastrophe of debt for our children and grandchildren," Mr. Pence told ABC's "This Week."

Also on the chopping table for what is being dubbed "Operation Offset" is the \$286 billion transportation bill criticized by spending hawks because of the thousands of pork projects it contains.

"House conservatives, like every American, are committed to doing everything necessary for the families in the communities affected by this horrific storm," Mr. Pence said. "But we simply cannot break the bank of the federal budget that is currently running about an \$8 trillion national debt, about \$26,000 per family.

"So we've got to talk about big-ticket items," he said.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, South Carolina Republican, agreed that the prescription-drug plan should be delayed and suggested an across-the-board cut in nondefense spending.

"There's so much opportunity here to go back into the budget and extract some savings to help pay for this hurricane relief that I look at it as an opportunity for the Congress to get back to its roots of being fiscally sound and conservative. Maybe something good can come from this hurricane," Mr. Graham told "Fox News Sunday."

Some Republican lawmakers appearing on the talk show yesterday said they disagreed with statements made last week by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay that there is no fat left to cut in the federal budget.

Asked whether the government is running at peak efficiency, the Texas Republican said, "Yes, after 11 years of Republican majority, we've pared it down pretty good."

Mr. DeLay also defended the transportation funding as necessary for "important infrastructure" and said 100 programs and offices already have been cut in this year's budget.

"I've been a Republican for 11 years, and we're failing when it comes to controlling spending," Mr. Graham told "Fox News Sunday." "The transportation and the energy bill

would have been a good place to go back and revisit for some of the spending that occurred there."

Mr. Pence said Mr. DeLay's statement was an open challenge to tackle budget cuts.

"Our majority leader is a guy who knows how to throw the gauntlet down to his colleagues. House conservatives took that as an invitation to provide offsets to our leadership in the White House and Congress," Mr. Pence said.

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