

Disorder in the House; Last Gasp Bid to Avert Shutdown Crushed in Chamber Vote

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Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., speaks to the media about efforts to pass appropriations bills and avert a looming government shutdown, at the Capitol in Washington, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. (AP Photo/Mariam Zuhaib)

WASHINGTON — A last gasp attempt to keep the federal government fully funded beyond this weekend turned into a crushing defeat for House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., on Friday as 21 hard-right members of his conference voted against the plan that would have slashed the budgets of most agencies by up to 30%.

The debacle came after the Republican-controlled House passed three long-term appropriations bills late Thursday, but failed to do the same on a fourth, the appropriations bill for the

Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, and the Food and Drug Administration.

The latter bill died after more than two dozen moderate Republicans came out against a provision that would limit access to an abortion pill.

Friday's disastrous vote on the continuing resolution also came just hours after the speaker held a news conference in the Rayburn Room of the Capitol, ballyhooing the vote from the night before.

"I told you, don't give up on us because we're not giving up on the American people," McCarthy told the gathered reporters.

"When I became speaker, I said we're going to change Washington. And we did that by keeping our commitment to restoring regular order," he said later.

Clearly savoring the moment — he noted the House now has gotten four appropriations done, while the Senate hasn't finished with any — McCarthy beamed.

"My entire political career as a member of Congress, Republicans have never been able to do what they just did last night," he said.

"As we continue to get conservative winds and return to regular order, we need to pass a stopgap measure to allow the House to finish the job that we're supposed to do."

Because none of the bills the House passed on Thursday would have any impact on the looming government shutdown, the chamber had to move quickly to endorse a CR and begin negotiations with the Senate on a short-term spending deal that would then have to be voted on again — a Herculean task in the hours left.

In addition to drastic cuts to the budget of almost every agency other than the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security, McCarthy's bill, which would have kept the government funded through Oct. 31, included strict new border security provisions as a carrot for the hardliners.

It also would have sent up a bipartisan debt commission to start dealing with the nation's \$33 trillion in debt.

Even as McCarthy spoke, however, the fate of the continuing resolution he was about to put up for a vote appeared to be a foregone conclusion.

"Every member will have to go on record where they stand," the Republican McCarthy said at the Capitol.

Asked if he had the votes, he said only, "We'll see."

As soon as the floor debate began, Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., the most vociferous of the hardliners, announced he would be voting against the package, calling its border security provisions insufficient and urging his colleagues to "not surrender."

For many moderate Republicans, meanwhile, the choice they were given seemed too far to the extreme.

And then there was the White House, which began blasting away at the CR even before McCarthy entered the room for his press conference.

"The administration strongly opposes House passage of H.R. 5525, making continuing appropriations for fiscal year 2024, and for other purposes," a memo to reporters from the Office of Management and Budget said.

"Hours before a government shutdown, House Republicans are playing partisan games instead of working in a bipartisan

manner to fund the government and address emergency needs,” it said.

The OMB went on to describe the CR being readied for the House floor: “[A] blatant violation of the funding agreement the speaker and the president reached just a few months ago, the bill endangers the vital programs Americans rely on by making reckless cuts to programs, regardless of the consequences for critical services from education to food safety to law enforcement to housing to public health.

“It also fails to address key emergency funding needs where lives are at stake, ignoring the administration’s request for resources to combat the fentanyl crisis and effectively manage the border, support the people of Ukraine as they defend their homeland from Russia’s illegal war, and stand with communities across America as they recover from natural disasters,” the White House said.

The statement from the OMB also blasted the House CR for failing “to provide the resources needed to avoid severe disruptions to government services, including the provision of nutritious food for pregnant and postpartum women, infants and children.”

“The bill also includes harmful, partisan border legislation that would further exacerbate the challenges at the border. It would cut off most access to humanitarian protections in ways that are inconsistent with the nation’s values and international obligations,” the office added.

In the end, the vote was 198–232, with 21 hard-right Republicans voting to sink the package. Every Democrat in the chamber voted against it.

Afterwards a clearly aggravated McCarthy told reporters, “It’s not the end yet; I’ve got other ideas.”

And a conference meeting was scheduled for 4 p.m. Friday afternoon.

The bill’s failure a day before Saturday’s deadline to fund the government leaves few options left to prevent a shutdown that will furlough federal workers, leave 2 million military troops without pay, and disrupt government programs and services.

Speaking on the Senate floor, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. said, “We now stand at the precipice of an unnecessary, reckless, and entirely Republican-manufactured shutdown.

“In less than forty-eight hours, funding that pays the salaries of our troops, for border enforcement, for TSA operations and nutrition programs, all will come to a halt,” he said.

Schumer continued: “As I have said for months, Congress has only one option to avoid a shutdown: bipartisanship. We needed bipartisanship yesterday, we need it today, we will need it tomorrow. It’s true, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

“But in the House, sadly, unlike the Senate, we have not seen bipartisanship. We have only seen chaos. We have only seen paralysis. A few hours ago, Speaker McCarthy held a vote on a truly radical CR proposal everyone knew never stood a chance of passing the Senate.

“And now, the House Republicans’ CR has failed to even pass the House by an unexpectedly large and decisive margin: thirty four votes, much more than most expected.

“The Speaker has spent weeks catering to the hard right, and now, he finds himself in the exact same position he’s been in

since the beginning – no plan forward, no closer to passing something that avoids a shutdown,” he said.

Schumer urged McCarthy to abandon what he called “his doomed mission of trying to please MAGA extremists” and instead work across the aisle to keep the government open.

“Things seem to be getting worse for the Speaker rather than better, and it’s time for him to try bipartisanship,” he said.

Schumer noted that 76 Senators, Democrats and Republicans, had already voted to proceed with a continuing resolution in their chamber.

“I salute [those] on the other side of the aisle who joined us in moving forward,” he said.

“We will continue working on the CR over the course of today, and see if we can find some agreement to pass it quickly. That is what bipartisanship means: not that we agree on everything, but the disagreements do not paralyze the process,” Schumer continued.

“It will be our last chance to ensure that a shutdown is avoided. Any more time the Speaker spends trying to cobble together hard-right wish lists that can’t even pass the House would be a grievous mistake,” he added.

Addressing Speaker McCarthy directly, Schumer said, “if you don’t want our troops to go without pay, work in a bipartisan way. If you don’t want to see border funding endangered, work in a bipartisan way. If you don’t want to see seniors lose access to meals on wheels, or cuts to nutrition for women, infants and children, or holds on small business loans, work in a bipartisan way.”

As he wrapped up his remarks, Schumer said “at the end of the day, these MAGA extremists, who are the ones responsible for bringing us to the brink, fundamentally do not care about funding the government. Some of them are actually gleeful about a shutdown.

“Coddling the hard right is as futile as trying to nail Jello to a wall and the harder the Speaker tries, the bigger mess he makes,” Schumer added.

At her briefing with reporters on Friday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, “Extreme House Republicans are now tripling down on their demands to eviscerate programs millions of hardworking families count on.

“The path forward to fund the government has been laid out by the Senate with bipartisan support — House Republicans just need to take it,” she added.

She was joined at the briefing by Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young, who scoffed at reports McCarthy has promised not to take a salary during the shutdown.

“Look, I’m glad that the speaker has made that statement,” Young said. “By the way, members of Congress have to get paid, constitutionally, so maybe he’ll put it in a sock drawer. I don’t know, but they have to get paid during a shutdown.

“That’s theater. That is theater,” she said of McCarthy’s purported remarks.

“I will tell you, the guy that picks up the trash in my office won’t get a paycheck. That’s real. And that’s what makes me angry,” Young said.

Dan can be reached at dan@thewellnews.com and [@DanMcCue](https://www.instagram.com/DanMcCue)

