

After chaotic week, House heads home with government shutdown on horizon

The government will shut down if lawmakers cannot reach a spending deal by Sept. 30

By Marianna Sotomayor, Leigh Ann Caldwell, Amy B Wang and Jacqueline Alemany
The Washington Post

House lawmakers left town Thursday after a dramatic three-day workweek that saw them launch a divisive impeachment inquiry and calls for the removal of Speaker Kevin McCarthy from his position, as they made little movement toward averting a government shutdown.

Republicans also weren't able to move forward a traditionally noncontroversial defense spending bill, stymied by deep divisions in the party despite a shared goal of approving 12 individual appropriations bills.

The chaotic week brought into sharp focus the deepening divide in McCarthy's fractious conference. With a dwindling timeline to keep the government open beyond Sept. 30, McCarthy (R-Calif.) had hoped to gather support for a short-term funding solution that would allow Republicans more time to pass long-term funding bills. But hard-right lawmakers, angry over what they say is a lack of information on top-line budget numbers, blocked a procedural vote that halted any movement on appropriations bills.

Frustrations came to head in an explosive Thursday morning meeting, where McCarthy challenged his detractors to move or file "a f---ing motion" to remove him from his seat, according to several lawmakers and aides.

"You guys think I'm scared of a motion to vacate. Go f---ing ahead and do it. I'm not scared," McCarthy told the House GOP conference in the closed-door meeting, according to a lawmaker in attendance who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private remarks. A motion to vacate would kick off the process that could remove McCarthy from the speakership.

While McCarthy is the target of some lawmakers' ire, others in the conference are working to find compromise and beginning to trade paper on what a potential deal could look like on a short-term funding bill, known as a continuing resolution, that would keep the government funded at current fiscal levels and avert a shutdown.

Six Republican House members from two different factions — Reps. Stephanie I. Bice (Okla.), Dusty Johnson (S.D.), and Kelly Armstrong (N.D.) of the more pragmatic wing and Freedom Caucus leaders Reps. Chip Roy (Tex.), Scott Perry (Pa.) and Byron Donalds (Fla.) — met for two-and-a-half hours Wednesday night hashing out the parameters of a potential agreement.

Attendees of the meeting felt good about the progress and said a deal could be close — but they need buy-in from nearly every single Republican for a deal.

“The Republican Main Street Caucus and the House Freedom Caucus are working together in good faith to establish a plan to lower spending, secure the border, and avoid a government shutdown,” Johnson and Bice, who chair the Main Street Caucus, said in a statement. “The talks have been productive and we’ll continue to work toward a deal.”

The contours of a possible deal mirror what McCarthy and leadership aides had telegraphed earlier in the week as one route to keep the government funded for a short time: an extension of current fiscal levels for one month that includes funding for disaster relief and border security. Specifically, Republicans want to tack on the border security package they passed earlier this year, but without controversial provisions on E-Verify that previously divided the conference. That route also would allow the blocked Defense Department funding bill to advance.

McCarthy warned his conference Thursday that if the House doesn't pass any appropriations bills or a short-term funding bill to the Senate by the end of next week, the upper chamber will try to jam the House into swallowing whatever they deem appropriate to fund the government in the short-term.

While a deal has not formally been struck and provisions could change, Republicans hope to take the temperature of the conference on the possible continuing resolution through the weekend. Perry, Roy and Donalds took ideas to the rest of the Freedom Caucus on Thursday afternoon as lawmakers were seen going in and out of the office of Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R-Minn.).

“I think we’re in a better spot than we were as a conference two days ago, but we still have a lot of work to do,” Donalds said.

Pragmatic conservatives were rankled into action Wednesday after a small group of far-right colleagues refused to help clear a procedural hurdle to begin consideration of a bill funding the Defense Department for a full fiscal year. Leadership then had to pull the motion from the calendar.

Republicans reacted enthusiastically to McCarthy forcefully pushing back on the far-right in Thursday’s meeting because a majority of the conference still supports him as speaker. Several people at the meeting noted that while McCarthy was blunt in addressing his detractors, many of them were not in the room.

Even if Republicans strike a deal to bring a short-term funding bill to the floor early next week, Republican leadership’s goal to quickly pass it faces a significant hurdle that could imperil McCarthy. Members of the Freedom Caucus have publicly suggested that if McCarthy relies on Democrats to clear a procedural hurdle on a short-term funding bill, that would be enough to trigger a motion to vacate vote. With a razor-thin Republican majority, even a small group of antagonists could succeed in removing McCarthy from the speakership if all Democrats voted to remove him. McCarthy would need 218 votes to keep the speaker’s gavel if a lawmaker triggers the motion.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries (N.Y.) said his caucus hasn’t yet discussed if they’d help McCarthy keep his job should Republicans try to oust him. Democratic support would depend on the circumstances. McCarthy’s launch of an impeachment inquiry into President Biden doesn’t provide any goodwill among Democrats and McCarthy would need to show

an attempt at bipartisanship on government funding if Democrats would even consider helping him, one Democratic lawmaker who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private, informal conversations said.

McCarthy began the week with several funding options for his conference to consider. He largely stressed that a short-term funding bill and the simultaneous passage of certain longer-term appropriation bills would put him in a stronger position to negotiate with the Senate, whose leaders are united on funding the government and addressing a number of spending asks by Biden, including additional funding for Ukraine.

But even with those broad asks, meant to gauge where support in the conference stood, members of the Freedom Caucus said they would block consideration of any appropriation bill until they received a top-line number and a series of cuts for the entire swath of one-year appropriations bills. The House has passed only one appropriation bill out of 12, after internal policy disputes also forced them to take consideration of a noncontroversial agriculture bill off the calendar.

The ongoing back-and-forth has Republicans less confident they can avert a shutdown even though many are continuing to pursue McCarthy's suggested path of passing a short-term deal and re-sending the same bill back to the Senate if they reject it.

"We're gonna have a shutdown. It's just a matter of how long," said Rep. Ralph Norman (R-S.C.), a member of the Freedom Caucus.

Even with the threat of a shutdown on the horizon, McCarthy spent much of his week talking about his nascent impeachment inquiry into Biden.

Republican leaders had hoped to use holding an impeachment inquiry vote as a bargaining chip that could win over the support of some hard-right lawmakers on supporting a government funding bill.

That move did not appear sufficient, however, as members of the Freedom Caucus and other far-right lawmakers reiterated that they view an impeachment inquiry as a separate matter from averting a shutdown. There was not enough support among conservative lawmakers to support an

impeachment inquiry in a full House vote, though Republicans broadly support continuing to investigate Biden and his son Hunter.

In his first course of action upon returning to Washington on Tuesday, McCarthy unilaterally directed House committees to open an impeachment inquiry into Biden, after previously vowing that an inquiry would be launched only with a full House vote. The move was an apparent attempt to satisfy hard-right lawmakers and protect vulnerable incumbents representing Biden districts from taking a vote on the matter ahead of the 2024 election.

Few lawmakers seemed moved by McCarthy's gambit, which angered some hard-right members even further. Rep. Andrew Ogles (R-Tenn.), a member of the Freedom Caucus, said there would be "hell to pay" if McCarthy tried to use the inquiry as leverage for support for a short-term spending bill, while Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) brushed off the announcement as lip service, calling the inquiry a "baby step."

McCarthy said the inquiry would focus on whether the president benefited from his son's business dealings, among other issues. House Republicans have not put forth any direct evidence that the president profited from his son's foreign business work. The White House has called the inquiry "an evidence-free goose chase."

In the wake of McCarthy's announcement, lawmakers have offered few specifics on how an impeachment inquiry into Biden will differ from their current investigative work. House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) and Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) told reporters that the announcement gave them new investigative tools. But legal experts and people with experience working on impeachment inquiries challenged those arguments, telling The Washington Post that while an inquiry might strengthen the party's hand in resolving any possible litigation, an impeachment inquiry did not give any new powers to the committees.

After Thursday morning's GOP conference meeting, McCarthy appeared upbeat but declined to describe the language he had used or answer whether he thought he had the votes to avoid a motion to vacate.

“At the end of the day, I think the best thing to happen here is that we’re able to get our work done and we don’t get into that mess,” McCarthy told reporters.

“Kevin McCarthy does not let these little things get underneath the skin. Nothing has come easy for this guy in the last nine months,” Johnson said. “Like all of us, he does occasionally get frustrated by how many members, including myself, can be knuckleheads in any given day. But listen, I mean, he understands that he’s the right guy at this moment. And he’s not going to be dissuaded by the fact that the job’s hard.”

Several GOP lawmakers emerged from the meeting voicing support for McCarthy, who endured 15 rounds of voting to win the speaker’s gavel in January. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), one of McCarthy’s staunchest allies in the far-right wing of the conference, told reporters that she no longer was a member of the “burn-it-all-down caucus,” referring to the Freedom Caucus, and saw no reason to oust McCarthy.

Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) also stuck with McCarthy, stressing that he “has done everything that any speaker ... would be expected to do.”

“He’s made sure that regular order and all his promises are kept. So I think that the speaker’s frustration is unique because he has done everything they’ve asked and made every commitment,” Issa added.

Democrats, who slammed the impeachment inquiry as a political stunt, described the Republican conference as a three-ring circus. They are not expected to help Republicans pass any procedural hurdles on government funding.

“Ring 1: Shut down the government. Ring 2: Impeach President Biden. Ring 3: Jam your extreme right-wing ideology down the throats of the American people,” Jeffries said Thursday. “House Republicans are fighting each other, and you know what it means for everyday Americans: more chaos, more dysfunction and more extremism. It’s sad. It’s dangerous. And it’s pathetic.”

Some House Republicans privately fear that if a deal is struck between the House and Senate on a short-term funding bill that their far-right colleagues likely won’t support it. Norman suggested as much, saying

Thursday that there is little chance of House Republicans winning a legislative showdown with the Senate and the White House. Shutting the government down would help Republicans win the public relations battle for future elections, he argued.

“We fight, we believe in what we are doing, the jury will be the country. And the jury is fed up with government and the spending, the reckless spending,” Norman said, making an assertion that history suggests is wrong.

Vulnerable Republicans representing Biden districts remain the most concerned about such predictions by the far-right, fearing that a government shutdown would give Democrats the upper hand in arguing that the government stayed open when they were in the majority.

“It’s hurting us in 2024. There’s five or 10 people doing it and they’re undermining the whole institution,” one moderate Republican said, encapsulating the fear many vulnerable lawmakers have and speaking on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly. “They prefer to be in the minority. ... They can yell and shout and they don’t have to worry about governing.”

Republicans know they have their work cut out for them, with many echoing McCarthy’s direction that the House will not leave “until we get this job done” to avert a shutdown.

After attending Thursday’s meeting, Armstrong set expectations as Republicans partaking in “a messy Thanksgiving dinner.”

“It’s like when your cousin shows up and somebody has one too many glasses of wine,” he said. “And we all fight, but we’re all family, and we’re going to do our best to figure this out.”