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Subject: Print Alert | THE HILL: GOP risks spending confrontation with Trump
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GOP risks spending confrontation with Trump

The Hill | Alexander Bolton | August 29, 2017 - 6:00AM

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GOP leaders seeking a way out of their September logjam are talking about tying a disaster aid bill for Hurricane Harvey to a larger measure funding the government and raising the nation's borrowing limit.

Including the disaster aid would almost certainly win some Republican votes for the package, which will otherwise be unpopular with GOP lawmakers who oppose a "clean" debt-ceiling hike and would like to impose restrictions on government spending.

But the move risks a confrontation with President Trump, who is demanding that the end-of-month bill include \$1.6 billion in funding for his border wall.

Trump has repeatedly suggested he is willing to shut down the government to win funding for his wall, an outcome GOP leaders want to avoid just more than a year ahead of midterm elections where they will be defending majorities in the House and Senate.

Trump on Monday vowed to win quick disaster relief funding for Harvey's victims, but suggested that he saw the aid package and the wall as separate issues.

The president batted down suggestions that delivering emergency funding to Texas would be hurt by his threats to shut down the government if a spending package doesn't contain funding for his border wall.

"It has nothing to do with it, really. I think this is separate," Trump said. "This is going to go very, very quickly. Everybody feels the same way I do."

GOP leaders in the House and Senate did not say anything publicly on Monday about their plans for a package tying Harvey aid to the government-funding package.

AshLee Strong, a spokeswoman for Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), said the House is prepared to provide emergency funding for Texas but first must receive guidance from the administration on what is needed.

“We will help those affected by this terrible disaster. The first step in that process is a formal request for resources from the administration,” she said.

Republican aides said the argument GOP leaders are likely to make to Trump in the coming weeks, is that adding emergency funding to the package will increase pressure on members of both parties to vote for it.

Passage would secure an important legislative victory for Trump even if it doesn’t include wall funding — which can be the subject of another battle later this year, an administration source said.

The sales job would come at another low point in the relationship between Trump and his Capitol Hill allies. The president has ripped into Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) repeatedly since the Senate’s failure to repeal ObamaCare, and last week blamed McConnell and Ryan over the debt-ceiling talks.

Republican leaders have pushed back against White House demands on wall funding, knowing that Senate Democrats will filibuster any spending bill that includes money for the wall.

Senate Republicans already are reaching out to Democrats to secure enough votes to pass the measure, knowing full well they will suffer defections among conservatives who want spending cuts included in the package.

An administration source said the preliminary talk is for McConnell and the Senate to take the lead on the government funding and debt-limit package, since there is strong opposition in the House to moving a clean debt limit.

McConnell’s office declined to comment other than to point to previous statements, including his declaration last week at an event in Louisville that there is “zero chance” Congress will fail to increase the debt limit next month, a failure that would raise the specter of a default.

Asked about the debt limit, Ryan’s office said, “House Republicans are discussing with the Senate and the administration, and we will act before the deadline.”

Republican leaders hope there will be enough political momentum to pay for the disaster in Texas and keep the government funded to avoid a big fight with conservatives over the debt-limit, which will be pegged to the spending package.

Members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus have already objected to lumping the stop-gap spending measure and the debt-limit bill into one bill.

“I’m surprised how firmly the House Freedom Caucus has said that’s not happening,” said a Republican source involved in the talks, referring to pairing the continue resolution and the debt limit.

Conservative lawmakers want to separate the two priorities so they can garner more attention for their demand that the debt-limit increase be attached to spending reforms.

Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), the chairman of the Freedom Caucus, reiterated in a recent interview with the Hill, that a clean debt-limit measure without spending reforms is not acceptable.

“The real question becomes, when we had President Obama in the White House, we never did a clean debt ceiling. Why do we do a clean debt ceiling now that we have a Republican in the White House? Most of my constituents won’t understand why we did that,” he told The Hill.