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Last Ditch Effort To Avoid Fiscal Cliff Under Way

Congressional Leaders Take A
Final Stab At Compromise

BY DAVID ESPO AND JIM KUHNHENN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The end game at hand, the White House and Senate leaders took a final stab at compromise Friday night to prevent middle-class tax increases from taking effect at the turn of the new year and possibly prevent sweeping spending cuts as well.

"I'm optimistic we may still be able to reach an agreement that can pass both houses in time," President Barack Obama said at the White House after meeting for more than an hour with congressional leaders.

Surprisingly, after weeks of postelection gridlock, Senate leaders sounded even more bullish.

The Republican leader, Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, said he was "hopeful and optimistic" of a deal, adding he hoped a compromise could be presented to rank-and-file lawmakers as early as Sunday, a little more than 24 hours before the year-end deadline.

Said Majority Leader Harry Reid: "I'm going to do everything I can" to prevent the tax increases and spending cuts that threaten to send the economy into recession. He cautioned, "Whatever we come up with is going to be imperfect."

Officials said there was a general understanding that any agreement would block scheduled income tax increases for middle class earners while letting rates rise at upper income levels.



ANDREW HARRER/ABACA PRESS
President Barack Obama said he is optimistic about fiscal cliff negotiations during a news conference at the White House in Washington, D.C., on Friday. The remarks to the media followed a meeting with Congressional Republican leaders at the White House to discuss the looming tax hikes and spending cuts of the approaching fiscal cliff.

Democrats said Obama was sticking to his campaign call for increases above \$250,000 in annual income, even though in recent negotiations he said he could accept \$400,000.

The two sides also confronted a

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Standoff Puts U.S. Payrolls In Doubt

BY JIM PUZZANGHERA AND MARC LIFSHER
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — If the nation goes over the "fiscal cliff," some Americans will wake up Tuesday with financial headaches to rival a New Year's Eve hangover.

More than 2 million long-term jobless would receive their final unemployment benefit check within days. Millions of taxpayers would be unable to file their returns early, resulting in delayed refunds. Taxes would rise immediately on workers across the board. And although some of

those increases may eventually be reversed, the first paychecks of the year would be smaller until any legislative fixes kick in.

Even if the crisis is resolved quickly after the new year as pressure mounts on President Barack Obama and lawmakers, it poses a short-term administrative nightmare for businesses. And it would be a financial blow to millions of people struggling to make ends meet in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

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Auditor: Data Entry Error Led To Incorrect Levy Assessments

BY NATHAN JOHNSON
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Since becoming the Yankton County auditor in 1999, Paula Jones has dutifully calculated local tax levies every year without incident. However, in 2011 something went

wrong with the process that led to property owners being under-taxed a total of almost \$224,000 on their 2012 bills.

"It started with a data entry error," Jones said. "The way the program responded was, it shorted some of the taxing districts. It didn't take money

from any of them. It just meant they didn't get all the dollars they requested."

Last week, the Yankton County Commission decided the only way to provide the various tax entities with

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7 Injured In Morning Fire



KELLY HERTZ/P&D
Yankton Assistant Fire Chief Larry Nickles examines the window of an apartment that was heavily damaged in a fire Friday morning in Yankton. Seven people needed medical treatment from the blaze, and 12 people were displaced because of damage to the building.

Heavy Smoke, Fire
Damage Sustained
Throughout The
Apartment Building

BY DEREK BARTOS
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Seven people were treated for injuries from an apartment fire in Yankton early Friday morning.

Firefighters were called to an apartment building at 801 Dakota St. at 7:19 a.m. Friday. According to a press release from the Yankton Fire Department, one apartment was "heavily involved with fire with heavy smoke throughout the building."

Two residents were rescued via ground ladders from second story apartments and two victims were rescued by firefighters from a second story apartment via interior stairwells.

The entire apartment building sustained heavy smoke damage with heavy fire damage to one apartment. The fire department was on scene for two and a half hours.

Twelve residents were displaced because of the fire. The Yankton Red Cross will be assisting those individuals.

"They'll be helping with relocation to make sure people have a place to go tonight," said Yankton Assistant Fire Chief Larry Nickles. "They'll also help with clothes and things like that."

Nickles said the cause of the fire is currently unknown.

"We'll continue our investigation formally with the fire marshal's office," he said.

The Yankton Fire Department was assisted by the Yankton Police Department, Yankton County Emergency Management, Yankton County EMS, Yankton County Search and Rescue and the Yankton Fire Department Auxiliary.



P&D FILE PHOTO

Elementary school students in Avon are shown working in the classroom in this Press & Dakotan photo from last year. Avon Elementary School was one of four area schools identified as top-performing attendance centers in 2011-12 by the South Dakota Department of Education. Others on the list were Hurley Elementary School and Freeman and Scotland high schools.

Area Schools Set The Standard For The State

BY RANDY DOCKENDORF
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When it comes to making the grade, four area schools achieved the highest marks under South Dakota's new accountability system.

The Avon and Hurley elementary schools and the Scotland and Freeman high schools were identified as top-performing attendance centers in 2011-12. The state Department of Education recently released the results.

As part of South Dakota's waiver from No Child Left Behind, the state designated the top 5 percent of public schools as "exemplary" status. The honor was given to 23 elementary and middle schools and seven high schools across the state.

Not only did they make the top 5 percent, Scotland and Freeman finished first and second, respectively, among the state's high schools.

At Scotland, Superintendent Damon Alvey noted the morale boost at landing the top spot. "We are really proud of the effort that the kids and staff put forward," he said. "It's a neat honor

for our community."

Scotland did well on all four factors used in the School Performance Index (SPI), Alvey said. The SPI includes attendance, graduation rates, ACT college-entrance exam scores and the Dakota STEP (state standardized) test scores.

"Our kids have been achieving well on the Dakota STEP and the ACT," he said. "The attendance in small schools is typically pretty good, and the graduation rate was real favorable for us."

As runner-up among the state's secondary districts, Freeman High School principal Kim Krull said he considered himself "fortunate" to work at the high-achieving school.

"As far as major factors to our success goes, I would say there are three things that stick in my mind and in no particular order," he said. "Number one, we have great kids. Second, we have great teachers, and we try to let them do their jobs the best that we can and provide them with resources as best we can. The third thing is that the community of Freeman places great value on education."

At Avon, the exemplary status comes on the heels of national recognition.

"We won the National Blue Ribbon Award in 2011, so our elementary teachers do a great job," said Superintendent Tom Culver, who also serves as elementary principal.

"Our teachers work hard, are talented and take a lot of pride in what they do. We have got good kids and supporting parents and community."

The Avon students scored high on two key categories for exemplary status, Culver said.

"Out of a possible 100 points, we scored a little more than 94, which was pretty good," he said. "Our attendance is good, and our elementary students do very well on test scores."

When it comes to her district's success, Viborg-Hurley elementary principal Dawn Wirth credits small class sizes and one-on-one attention given students.

Viborg and Hurley patrons voted last year to

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