

Senate Approves \$60.4 Billion Sandy Aid Bill

BY ANDREW MIGA
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Friday approved a \$60.4 billion emergency spending aid package for victims of Hurricane Sandy that had been backed by Senate Democrats.

Democrats had to turn back Republican efforts to cut programs such as \$150 million in fisheries aid that Republican lawmakers said was unrelated to the storm that hammered the East Coast late in October. The measure cleared the Senate on a 61-33 vote, with 12 Republicans supporting of the bill.

The bill faces uncertain prospects in the House, where GOP leaders appear reluctant to move quickly on a big spending bill in the final days of a lame duck session. Congress' attention is focused on talks over the so-called fiscal cliff of tax hikes and automatic spending cuts.

Sandy was blamed for at least 120 deaths and battered coastline areas from North Carolina to Maine. New York, New Jersey and Connecticut were the hardest hit states and suffered high winds, flooding and storm surges. Sandy damaged or destroyed more than 72,000 homes and businesses in New Jersey. In New York, 305,000 housing units were damaged or destroyed and more than 265,000 businesses were affected.

Senate Republicans failed on an amendment for a smaller package of about \$24 billion in aid for Sandy, which was the most costly natural disaster since Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and one of the worst storms ever in the Northeast.

House GOP leaders have not said how they plan to proceed. But House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers of Kentucky has said Congress should probably begin with a smaller aid package for immediate recovery needs and wait until more data can be collected about storm damage before approving additional money next year.

Rep. Paul Ryan, the 2012 GOP vice presidential nominee and a leading House fiscal conservative, has criticized the Democratic bill as "packed with funding for unrelated items, such

as commercial fisheries in American Samoa and roof repair of museums in Washington, D.C." Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., urged House leaders to "put this bill on the floor quickly and allow a vote." If the House balks, Schumer said, the Senate bill provides "very good ground-work" for seeking Sandy aid next year.

The measure includes \$11.5 billion for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's chief disaster relief fund and \$17 billion for community development block grants, much of which would help homeowners repair or replace their homes. Another \$11.7 billion would help repair New York City's subways and other mass transit damage and protect them from future storms. Some \$9.7 billion would go toward the government's flood insurance program. The Army Corps of Engineers would receive \$5.3 billion to mitigate flood future risks and rebuild damaged projects. Dozens of other smaller items were also included in the package.

Senate Republicans said much of the spending in the Democratic bill was for projects unrelated to Sandy, such as \$150 million for fisheries disasters that could go to Alaska as well as Gulf Coast and New England states. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., sought to strip the fisheries funding, but his amendment failed.

To court votes, Democrats last week broadened some of their bill's provisions to cover damage from Hurricane Isaac, which struck the Gulf Coast earlier this year. A provision was added to the \$2.9 billion allotted to Army Corps of Engineers projects to reduce future flooding risks; the coverage area for that program will now include areas hit by Isaac in addition to Sandy. Democrats also shifted \$400 million into a community development program for regions suffering disasters, beyond areas struck by Sandy.

A Coburn amendment to reduce the federal share of costs for the Army Corps of Engineer projects to reduce future flooding risks also failed.

Most of the money in the \$60.4 billion bill — \$47.4 billion — is for immediate help for victims and other recovery and rebuilding efforts. The

aid is intended to help states rebuild public infrastructure like roads and tunnels, and help thousands of people displaced from their homes.

"It will actually put people to work in their own communities, rebuilding their own communities," said Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee.

GOP Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Coburn, two frequent critics of government spending, targeted what they called "questionable" spending in the Democratic bill, including \$2 million for roof repairs at Smithsonian Institution museums and more than \$58 million in subsidies for tree planting on private properties. A McCain amendment to strip the tree subsidies failed.

Republicans also criticized \$13 billion in the Democratic bill for projects to protect against future storms, including fortifying mass transit systems in the Northeast and protecting vulnerable seaside areas by building jetties against storm surges. Republicans said however worthy such projects may be, they are not urgently needed and should be considered by Congress in the usual appropriations process next year.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that only about \$9 billion of the \$60.4 billion proposed by Democrats would be spent over the next nine months. The Democratic bill included many large infrastructure projects that often require years to complete, but Republicans said the CBO estimate of such drawn-out spending undercuts the urgency of the Democrats' aid package.

More than \$2 billion in federal funds has been spent so far on relief efforts for 11 states and the District of Columbia. FEMA's disaster relief fund still has about \$4.3 billion, and officials have said that is enough to pay for recovery efforts into early spring.

New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, District of Columbia, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, New Hampshire, Delaware, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts are receiving federal aid.

N.Y. Woman Charged In Connection With Slaying Of Two Firefighters

WEBSTER, N.Y. (AP) — The neighbor of a convicted felon who ambushed firefighters on Christmas Eve, killing two, bought the guns for him and lied to the seller, knowing that he wasn't allowed to have them, authorities said Friday.

William Spengler had picked out the semiautomatic rifle and shotgun used in the ambush and went to the sporting goods store with the neighbor when she bought them for him, U.S. Attorney William Hochul said.

The neighbor, Dawn Nguyen of Rochester, was arrested Friday. She faces a federal charge of knowingly making a false statement for signing a form indicating she would be the legal owner of the guns, Hochul said. She also was charged with a state count of filing a falsified business record, State Police Senior Investigator James Newell said.

Shortly before her arrest, Nguyen told The Associated Press that she didn't want to talk about Spengler. A number listed in the name of her lawyer, David Palmiere, was disconnected.

The charges stem from the purchase of an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle and a 12-gauge shotgun that

Spengler had with him Monday when firefighters Michael Chiaperini and Tomasz Kaczowka were gunned down. Three other people were wounded before the 62-year-old Spengler killed himself. He also had a .38-caliber revolver, but Nguyen is not connected to that gun, Newell said.

Police used the serial numbers on the rifle and shotgun, which were purchased on June 6, 2010, to trace them to Nguyen, Hochul said.

"She told the seller of these guns, Gander Mountain in Henrietta, N.Y., that she was to be the true owner and buyer of the guns instead of William Spengler," he said. "It is absolutely against federal law to provide any materially false information related to the acquisition of firearms."

"It is sometimes referred to acting as a straw purchaser and that is exactly what today's complaint alleges," he said.

The federal charges carry a maximum penalty of ten years imprisonment, a fine of \$250,000 or both.

During an interview late on Christmas Eve, Nguyen told police she had bought the guns for personal protection and that they

were stolen from her vehicle, though she never reported the guns stolen.

The day after the shootings, Nguyen texted an off-duty Monroe County Sheriff's deputy with references to the killings. She later called the deputy and admitted she bought the guns for Spengler, police said.

That information was consistent with a suicide note found near Spengler's body after he killed himself.

Nguyen and her mother, Dawn Welsher, lived next door to Spengler in 2008. On Wednesday and again on Friday, she answered her cellphone and said she didn't want to discuss Spengler. Her brother, Steven Nguyen, told the Democrat and Chronicle newspaper of Rochester that Spengler stole the guns from Dawn Nguyen.

Spengler set a car on fire and touched off an inferno in his Webster home on a strip of land along the Lake Ontario shore, took up a sniper's position and opened fire on the first firefighters to arrive at about 5:30 a.m. on Christmas Eve, authorities said. He wounded two other firefighters and an off-duty

police officer who was on his way to work.

A Webster police officer who had accompanied the firefighters shot back at Spengler with a rifle in a brief exchange of gunfire before the gunman killed himself.

Spengler spent 17 years in prison for killing his grandmother in 1980. He had been released from parole in 2006 on the manslaughter conviction, and authorities said they had had no encounters with him since.

Investigators still haven't released the identity of remains found in Spengler's burned house. They have said they believe the remains are those of his 67-year-old sister, Cheryl Spengler, who also lived in the house near Rochester and has been unaccounted for since the killings. The Spengler siblings had lived in the home with their mother, Arline Spengler, who died in October. In all, seven houses were destroyed by the flames.

Investigators found a rambling, typed letter laying out Spengler's intention to destroy his neighborhood and "do what I like doing best, killing people."

"We believe each class is unique and has its own set of circumstances, along with strengths and areas in need of improvement," he said. "While we consistently address the standards, there is no guarantee that achievement scores are going to remain consistent. In fact, I would tend to say, in any school, that's unlikely."

The Freeman school district remains focused on classroom instruction as the key to student success, Krull said.

"There are a great many changes coming in education," he said. "Knowing when and how to implement them all is a challenge in and of itself. It takes a great deal of prioritizing."

Wirth looks to maintain a top state ranking for the new school district.

"Next year, we'll be celebrating Viborg-Hurley as an exemplary school," she predicted.

Data for individual schools, including points earned for the various indicators, can be accessed at doe.sd.gov/secretary/spi.aspx.

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at twitter.com/RDockendorf

Schools

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merge their districts, which became effective July 1. The Hurley elementary school was cited as exemplary in 2011-12, but all Viborg and Hurley attendance centers met their adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirement and did well in test scores and attendance, Wirth said.

"I would say the kids have done well because of the years of good education, not just one year," she said. "It shows in their test scores."

Wirth noted the important role of parents and the communities in supporting the schools.

"It takes a village, and we say that every day," she said. "It's a village that includes the teachers and children. But it also includes the support they get at home. We couldn't do it without (the family support)."

While sometimes overlooked, regular school attendance plays a key role in classroom success, Wirth said.

"If the kids aren't here at school, they aren't getting what they need academically. If they are missing 10 or 15 percent of the days, that really adds up," she said. "When you have 175 contact days in a school year, and they are missing 10 percent, it comes out to a couple of days a month. That doesn't seem like a lot, but it really makes a difference."

SEEING WHERE WE STAND

Alvey, who also serves as elementary principal, admitted school officials often get nervous about comparisons, even when their districts finish at the top of the list.

"We are like most schools, where everybody is apprehensive when (state or federal officials) put out a list and are ranking schools," he said.

On the other hand, the test scores and rankings give districts an idea of where they stand, Alvey said.

"We've always thought we have done things pretty well. We always try to make the school system bet-

ter," he said. "It's sort of satisfying knowing that things are working, even if you're not No. 1. That we are recognized among the high-performing schools is satisfying by itself. You're recognizing achievement and our kids being successful."

Alvey doesn't see the prominence of small schools on the exemplary list as an accident.

"We offer more of a personal touch. We know most of the families and we know all the kids. It's one of those things that give us an advantage over larger schools," he said.

As part of its staff development, the Avon school board offers money to help teachers pursue additional training. The money currently stands at \$500 annually, which can be used for college classes and workshops, he said.

"If there's something I want them to go to, that doesn't count against what the district pays for (their own studies)," he said. "We have teachers use it for their masters degree. The district keeps paying for those studies. A lot of teachers have used that money on a regular basis."

The additional money has been

offered for years and formerly stood at \$1,000 annually before an 8 percent cut in state aid, Culver said. "The board would like to transition it back up to \$1,000, if possible," he said.

CHANGE IS ON THE WAY

The four area administrators know their districts must work to maintain their exemplary status. That's particularly true with more changes on the horizon.

This marks a transitional year for the new state accountability system. Other factors, including academic growth, will be added to the SPI by the 2014-15 school year.

Once fully implemented, the state Department of Education plans to use three years of data for most SPI factors. The current calculation is based on only one year of data.

School officials need to maintain perspective when looking at their data, Krull said.

Districts may do their best to provide a curriculum founded on standards, he said. However, the SPI is based on the junior class scores, and those individuals change each year as classes move through the school system, he said.

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U.S. Banks Closing Year With Strong Profits

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. banks are ending the year with their best profits since 2006 and fewer failures than at any time since the financial crisis struck in 2008. They're helping support an economy slowed by high unemployment, flat pay, sluggish manufacturing and anxious consumers.

As the economy heals from the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, more people and businesses are taking out — and repaying — loans.

And for the first time since 2009, banks' earnings growth is being driven by higher revenue — a healthy trend. Banks had previously managed to boost earnings by putting aside less money for possible losses.

Signs of the industry's gains:

— Banks are earning more. In the July-September quarter, the industry's earnings reached \$37.6 billion, up from \$35.3 billion a year earlier. It was the best showing since the July-September quarter of 2006, long before the financial meltdown. By contrast, at the depth of the Great Recession in the last quarter of 2008, the industry lost \$32 billion.

Experts: Trained Police Needed For Schools

WASHINGTON (AP) — The student's attack began with a shotgun blast through the windows of a California high school. Rich Agundez, the El Cajon policeman assigned to the school, felt his mind shift into overdrive.

People yelled at him amid the chaos but he didn't hear. He experienced "a tunnel vision of concentration."

While two teachers and three students were injured when the glass shattered in the 2001 attack on Granite Hills High School, Agundez confronted the assailant and wounded him before he could get inside the school and use his second weapon, a handgun.

The National Rifle Association's response to a Connecticut school massacre envisions, in part, having trained, armed volunteers in every school in America. But Agundez, school safety experts and school board members say there's a huge difference between a trained law enforcement officer who becomes part of the school family — and a guard with a gun.

The NRA's proposal has sparked a debate across the country as gun control rises once again as a national issue. President Barack Obama promised to present a plan in January to confront gun violence in the aftermath of the killing of 20 Sandy Hook Elementary School students and six teachers in Newtown, Conn.

Putin Signs Bill Banning American Adoptions

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin on Friday signed a law banning Americans from adopting Russian children, abruptly terminating the prospects for more than 50 youngsters preparing to join new families and sparking critics to liken him to King Herod.

The move is part of a harsh response to a U.S. law targeting Russians deemed to be human rights violators. Although some top Russian officials including the foreign minister openly opposed the bill, Putin signed it less than 24 hours after receiving it from Parliament, where it passed both houses overwhelmingly.

The law also calls for the closure of non-governmental organizations receiving American funding if their activities are classified as political — a broad definition many fear could be used to close any NGO that offends the Kremlin.

The law takes effect Jan. 1, the Kremlin said. Children's rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov said 52 children who were in the pipeline for U.S. adoption would remain in Russia.

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