

Health Care Ruling Will Start Fundraising Storm

WASHINGTON (AP) — Barely four months before the nation votes, one of the biggest factors in the fight for the White House still is a mystery. That will change on Thursday.

The Supreme Court's expected ruling on President Barack Obama's sweeping federal health care law will shape the contours of the presidential campaign through the summer and fall. Both Obama and Republican rival Mitt Romney are primed to use the ruling — whatever it is — for political gain.

Obama expresses confidence the court will uphold his signature legislative initiative. But he won't be shocked if a conservative majority overturns the most controversial provision, those familiar with his thinking say. Romney aides say the Republican candidate will get a political boost if the court strikes down the measure. But they don't want celebrations that could alienate voters who could lose health care benefits through the decision.

Neither candidate has any direct influence over the decision. The court may uphold the health care law, strike it down or deem the requirement that most Americans carry health insurance unconstitutional while keeping other aspects in place.

The ruling is expected to be followed almost immediately by a barrage of advertisements and fundraising appeals from Democrats and Republicans, with both sides trying to cast the decision in the most advantageous light for its candidate.

Tentative Deals Reached On Student Loan Bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing weekend deadlines for action, congressional leaders have tentatively agreed to deals overhauling the nation's transportation programs without a Republican provision forcing approval of the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline, and avoiding a doubling of interest rates for new student loans, congressional officials said Wednesday.

The agreements underscored the pressures both parties face to avoid angering voters and embarrassing headlines in the run-up to this November's presidential and congressional elections. Letting road-building programs grind to a halt during an economic downturn would be a blow to the image of lawmakers, while Democrats and Republicans alike seemed eager to avoid enraging millions of students and their parents by boosting the costs of college loans.

Congressional leaders were hoping to combine the highway and student loan measures into a single bill to reduce potential procedural obstacles, and hope to vote final approval this week. Lawmakers would then leave Washington for a July 4 recess.

The two-year highway bill would prevent the government's authority to spend money on highways, bridges and transit systems from lapsing on Saturday, along with its ability to collect gasoline and diesel taxes. With both parties checkmating each other's top priorities this campaign season, Democrats and Republicans say the highway measure will be Congress' top job-creation initiative until the November elections.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., chief Senate sponsor of the transportation bill, said the measure would save or create 3 million jobs.

Texas Man Gets 40 Years For Killing Neighbor

HOUSTON (AP) — A man who claimed Texas' version of a stand-your-ground law allowed him to fatally shoot a neighbor after an argument about a noisy party was sentenced Wednesday to 40 years for murder.

Raul Rodriguez, 46, had faced up to life in prison for the 2010 killing of Kelly Danaher.

Rodriguez, a retired Houston-area firefighter, was angry about the noise coming from a birthday party at his neighbor's home. He went over and got into an argument with 36-year-old elementary school teacher Danaher and two other men at the party.

In a 22-minute video he recorded on the night of the shooting, Rodriguez can be heard telling a police dispatcher "my life is in danger now" and "these people are going to go try and kill me." He then said, "I'm standing my ground here," and fatally shot Danaher and wounded the other two men.

Rodriguez's reference to standing his ground is similar to the claim made by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who is citing Florida's stand-your-ground law in his defense in the fatal February shooting of an unarmed teenager, Trayvon Martin. Rodriguez's case, however, was decided under a different kind of self-defense doctrine.

C.G. Suspects Stowaways Started Trip In U.A.E.

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — Dock workers rushed to unload stacked containers from a cargo ship that arrived in New Jersey from the Middle East on Wednesday after a Coast Guard inspection team heard knocking for about two hours that suggested stowaways might be inside one of the boxes.

More than a dozen ambulances and law enforcement officials met the 850-foot Ville D'Aquarius when it docked early Wednesday at Port Newark, one of the nation's busiest ports. Large mechanical cranes began unloading containers from the ship.

By midday Wednesday, all but one ambulance had quietly left the pier. Coast Guard spokesman Charles Rowe said officials have inspected 80 of the 200 containers authorities believe could be carrying people. The ship has 2,000 containers altogether.

The Coast Guard team had boarded the ship outside New York Harbor early Wednesday as the ship prepared to dock, Rowe said. The officers were knocking on a bulkhead, or partition, of the ship as a routine security check and heard knocks back, he said, but they couldn't pinpoint the source of the sound. The return knocks ended after about two hours, Rowe said.

Victims Crowd Shelters As Fight Goes On

BY P. SOLOMON BANDA AND
THOMAS PEIPERT

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Fire crews fought to save the U.S. Air Force Academy and residents begged for information on the fate of their homes Wednesday after a night of terror sent thousands of people fleeing a raging Colorado Springs wildfire.

More than 30,000 have been displaced by the fire, including thousands who frantically packed up belongings Tuesday night after it barreled into neighborhoods in the foothills west and north of Colorado's second-largest city. With flames looming overhead, they clogged roads shrouded in smoke and flying embers, their fear punctuated by explosions of bright orange flame that signaled yet another house had been claimed.

"The sky was red, the wind was blowing really fast and there were embers falling from the sky," said Simone Covey, a 26-year-old mother of three who fled an apartment near Garden of the Gods park and was staying at a shelter. "I didn't really have time to think about it. I was just trying to keep my kids calm."

Wilma Juachon sat under a tree at an evacuation center, wearing a mask to block the smoke. A tourist from California, she was evacuated from a fire near Rocky Mountain National Park last week and, now, from her Colorado Springs hotel.

"I said I hope it never happens again, and guess what?" Juachon said.

Constantly shifting winds challenged firefighters trying to contain the 28-square-mile Waldo Canyon blaze and extinguish hot spots inside the city's western suburbs. The National Weather Service reported 60 mph winds and lightning above the fire on Wednesday afternoon.

"It won't stay in the same place," said incident commander Rich Harvey.

Some 3,000 more people were evacuated to the west of the fire, Teller County authorities said Wednesday.



CHRISTIAN MURDOCK/COLORADO SPRINGS GAZETTE

A helicopter flies Queens Canyon with a bucket of water while fighting the Waldo Canyon fire Wednesday. The five-day blaze has grown to more than 15,000 acres and has destroyed at least 100 homes in the Colorado Springs, Colo. area.

Meanwhile, the White House said President Barack Obama will tour fire-stricken areas of Colorado on Friday and thank firefighters battling some of the worst fires to hit the American West in decades. City Police Chief Richard Carey insisted that Obama's visit to Colorado, considered a key battleground state in the presidential election, would not tax Carey's already-strained police force. Gov. John Hickenlooper said he expected the president might sign a disaster declaration that would allow for more federal aid.

The full scope of the 24-square-mile fire remained unknown. So intense were the flames and so thick the smoke that rescue workers weren't able to tell residents which structures were destroyed and which ones were still standing. Steve Cox, a spokesman for Mayor Steve Bach, reported that at least dozens of homes had been consumed, though he had no more precise figure.

Indeed, authorities were too busy Wednesday struggling to save homes in near-zero visibility to count how many had been destroyed in what is the latest test for a drought-parched and tinder-dry state. Crews also were battling a deadly and destructive wildfire in

northern Colorado and another that flared Tuesday night near Boulder.

Carey said officials had no plans to release the numbers of homes destroyed — insisting residents have a right to be told first, in private.

FBI spokesman Dave Joly said federal investigators are working closely with local and state law enforcement to determine if any of Colorado's fires were deliberately set or resulted from criminal activity. He did not elaborate.

Colorado Springs Fire Chief Rich Brown said his personnel heroically saved many homes in the midst of the firestorm. The strategy: protecting houses adjacent to those in flames to prevent a domino effect and then racing to the next suburban hot spot, a technique he called "triage." Federal firefighters worked with U.S. Army bulldozer crews from nearby Fort Carson to create perimeter lines.

The Waldo Canyon Fire burned about 10 acres along the southwest boundary of the Air Force Academy campus. No injuries or damage to structures — including the iconic Cadet Chapel — were reported. With 90 firefighters battling the flames, Academy Superintendent Lt. Gen. Michael Gould insisted

that 1,500 cadets taking summer classes and more than 1,000 freshmen arriving Thursday will be safe — with campus ceremonies or housing to be moved away from the fire-hit area or off-campus if needed.

Four firefighting bulldozers were in a convoy heading into the academy Wednesday evening.

The Red Cross struggled to accommodate victims at its shelters, with space enough for perhaps 2,500 people. Most evacuees were staying with family and friends.

Colorado wasn't the only state affected by fire, as several burned throughout the parched West.

Tom Harbour, director of fire and aviation management for the U.S. Forest Service, said that with several fires burning, there is competition for firefighting resources, but "we're still at a point where we've got lots of available assets to mix and match on individual incidents."

Harbour said there's a difference between what incident commanders want and what they need to fight a fire effectively. And despite some criticism, he said the agency has been working to get equipment where it's needed most. Four military C-130 tankers, which can each carry up to 3,000 gallons of water, are positioned to cover the blazes burning near Colorado Springs and Fort Collins, as well as the entire Front Range if another fire were to break out, he said. At total of 18 air tankers were assigned to wildfires across the region.

Overall, there have been fewer fires and less acreage burned for the first six months of the year than for the same period in the previous six years. Some states are seeing fires earlier this year, but Harbour said resources are far from being exhausted.

"With over 10,000 firefighters in the Forest Service and the ability to get over 700 aircraft of all types, we're feeling cautiously confident when you look at the season as a whole," Harbour said.

House Moving Ahead With Plans For Contempt Vote

BY LARRY MARGASAK

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration and House Republicans refused to find a middle ground in a dispute over documents related to a botched gun-tracking operation, and the GOP plunged ahead with plans for precedent-setting votes Thursday to hold Attorney General Eric Holder in civil and criminal contempt of Congress.

The votes are expected hours after the Supreme Court will capture the nation's attention with its ruling on the legality of President Barack Obama's health care law. Even without that diversion, the contempt issue throws both parties temporarily off-track in their efforts to focus on the economy in an election year.

There's little question that Republicans will get the votes they need, not only from their own majority but from Democrats aligned with the National Rifle

Association — which has said it's keeping score. The NRA has said it believes the administration was using the flawed Operation Fast and Furious to make the case for more gun control.

Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., the longest serving House member and normally an NRA supporter, said Wednesday he would not back the contempt resolutions but instead wants the Oversight and Government Reform Committee to conduct a more thorough investigation.

The criminal contempt resolution would send the matter to the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, who is under Holder. The civil contempt resolution would allow the House to go to court in an effort to force Holder to turn over documents the Oversight committee wants. In past cases, courts have been reluctant to settle disputes between the executive and legislative branches of government.

The House is unlikely to get

the documents anytime soon, because President Barack Obama has invoked a broad form of executive privilege, which protects from disclosure internal documents in executive branch agencies.

In nearly three hours of arguments before the House Rules Committee on Wednesday, Republicans and Democrats squared off with oft-repeated arguments that have turned a major constitutional issue into a political food fight.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., and chairman of the Oversight panel, told the Rules Committee that the documents sought were essential to learn who in the administration produced a February, 2011 letter denying that Operation Fast and Furious allowed guns to "walk" from Arizona to Mexico. The Justice Department has already given Issa's committee 7,600 pages on the operation itself. The documents now sought covered a period after the operation was shut down.

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