

Senate

From Page 1

central issue in a special election Tuesday in which Democrats seized a longtime GOP district in western New York, rattling Republicans.

Among the moderate Republicans that opposed the stringent House plan were Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine, Scott Brown of Massachusetts and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. Tea-party favorite Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky opposed plan from the right since it doesn't actually balance and would add trillions of dollars to the U.S. debt.

Republicans faulted Democrats, who control the Senate, for failing to offer a plan of their own.

GOP senators immediately forced a vote on President Barack Obama's February budget proposal, which opened to chilly reviews in February for failing to aggressively tackle issues like the long-term future of benefit programs like Medicare and Social Security. Democrats joined Republicans in opposing the plan, which failed to receive a single vote.

Democrats staged the votes to put Republicans on record regarding the House-passed budget plan, authored by Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis. In addition to Medicare, the measure would sharply cut the Medicaid health care program for the poor and a host of other domestic programs.

Critics point to a nonpartisan analysis by the Congressional Budget Office predicting the House Medicare plan would pay a shrinking share of seniors' insurance premiums over time and would lead them to either choose policies that offer less generous coverage or force them to pay thousands of dollars a year in higher premiums to maintain the coverage currently offered by Medicare.

The votes weren't on the various budgets themselves but instead on motions to simply begin debate on them.

Under Congress' arcane budget process, a budget plan is not actual legislation but a nonbinding blueprint that sets a framework for future legislation. While it sets goals for raising or lowering taxes and imposing spending cuts, in most years the vote on a so-called budget resolution is mostly symbolic. In many years, that follow-up legislation is simply a round of appropriations bills.

With the House and Senate controlled by different parties, there's no hope for a final compromise between the two chambers.

In fact, Democrats have pulled the plug on the budget process for now, awaiting the results of negotiations between Vice President Joe Biden and senior lawmakers in both parties that are aimed at producing an agreement on a package of spending cuts exceeding \$1 trillion over the coming decade. The cuts would be packaged with must-pass legislation to permit the government to keep issuing bonds to finance its operations and keep its promises to investors in U.S. debt as it faces a deficit of \$1.6 trillion this year.

The Biden-led talks are expected to take several weeks or longer as an Aug. 2 deadline for raising the so-called debt limit looms.

The decision by Democrats to not advance a budget spares them from a process that would expose rifts within the party over taxes and how far to cut spending on federal benefit programs like Medicare and Medicaid. Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad originally drew up a plan heavy on spending cuts — with a 3 to 1 ratio of spending cuts to tax increases — but ran into opposition from liberals like Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

But Conrad's latest plan relies more on tax increases to meet a goal of cutting projected deficits by \$4 trillion over the coming decade. He might be able to get that plan approved by the Budget Committee, which is stocked with party loyalists, but it would likely fail on the floor due to opposition from party moderates.

The Democratic stall on the budget spares Democrats from a full slate of politically difficult votes.

Republicans have been blasting Democrats on a daily basis for their failure to produce a budget, saying they're failing to live up to their responsibility as the Senate's majority party.

"At a moment when our debts and deficits threaten the very future of our nation, Democrats have no excuse for proposing no vision of their own," said Senate GOP Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

The top Republican on the Budget panel, Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, hasn't offered an alternative, either, though conservative Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., and Paul offered stringent plans that would bring the budget into balance.

Toomey's plan would have produced a balanced budget by 2020 and received 42 GOP votes.

Paul offered a budget that he said would produce a surplus by 2016 by eliminating four Cabinet departments, aid to Israel, and a wide variety of programs for the poor. It failed by a 90-7 vote.

River

From Page 1

reached 136 percent of normal peak, but is slow to melt, with 132 percent of the normal peak accumulation remaining. In higher elevations, snowfall is still accumulating.

Becker said that water levels in the Lewis and Clark Lake area should not fluctuate much as part of the drainage process.

However, because of the increased flows through the Gavins Point Dam, down-river water levels are predicted to increase anywhere from three to five feet. The glut of water in the Missouri could also affect the water level along the James River, which has been falling after high spring flows.

"We've been doing a lot of coordinating with the communities in the area to ensure they know what the projections are and make plans," Becker said.

Affected areas could include

things like recreational facilities, water intakes and sewage treatment plants, he explained.

Kevin Kuhl, Yankton's public services director, said the city is looking at the potential impacts of the rising river level.

"We're trying to forecast something we have never seen before, because the flow rates will be higher than anything that has occurred since the dams were built along the Missouri," he said. "Yankton has done good drainage design for many years. We don't have many properties in the flood plain, so we have that advantage from the get-go. It takes years to protect yourself from such events."

Some storm sewers have been backing up as a result of the already high water level, Kuhl stated.

"We can address those with some extra maintenance, probably, and not have any significant problems," he said.

Most of the concern is for the city's water treatment and wastewater treatment facilities.

"The discharge pipe (of the

wastewater treatment plant) is only so high, and the water could reach that elevation," Kuhl said. "It will still flow, but we need to make different adjustments to get the water out of there."

The increased flows could also effect the quality of the water, which would require the treatment process for water brought into the city's water treatment plant through an intake valve to be adjusted.

"We'll watch that and be ready to respond, so we can take care of those issues should they occur," Kuhl said.

One of the major concerns for property owners along the Missouri River will be bank erosion, he stated. That's not a worry for Yankton.

"In Yankton's case, we have an armored bank that is not susceptible to that kind of erosion," Kuhl said.

Gov. Dennis Daugaard announced Wednesday that he has asked for emergency help from the Army Corps of Engineers to deal with the possible threat of Missouri River flooding in the Pierre and Fort Pierre areas, and

possibly farther downstream.

The request is for assistance from the Corps to build temporary levees, deal with road flooding and provide emergency supplies such as sandbags, pumps and generators.

Daugaard also said he's declared a state of emergency that frees up state resources to help local governments protect lives and property.

Back in Yankton, Becker said efforts will be made to keep boaters downstream from the dam safe by erecting electronic signs informing them of how close they can get. That will probably be done before this weekend.

"In 1997, we actually had

several boats capsize because they got sucked in on the back currents into the spillway area," he stated. "Luckily, there were no fatalities. We're going to be a little more conservative this time to make sure we keep boaters far enough downstream that they don't get into the whitewater or severe eddies."

With the fast moving currents, Becker said the Corps is encouraging anyone in or near the river to be extra cautious.

Depending on the weather, adjustments may have to be made quickly to the level of the flows.

"Mother Nature has given us this much water, and we're doing our best to manage it," Becker said.

U.S. Orders Nonessential Diplomats To Leave Yemen

WASHINGTON (AP) — The State Department on Wednesday ordered nonessential U.S. diplomats to depart Yemen and urged all Americans there to leave as security conditions deteriorated with the country's embattled leader refusing to step down.

The decision to tell most nonessential personnel and the families of all American staff at the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa to leave was a sign of Washington's increasing concern about the situation in Yemen, where street battles between supporters and opponents of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh raged for a third day. The clashes have left at least 41 dead and dozens badly injured.

It noted that violent clashes were occurring in Sanaa, the capi-

tal, and "may escalate without notice."

The "ordered departure" notice came in a new travel warning for Yemen released as the Obama administration stepped up calls for Saleh to transfer power under an agreement negotiated by neighboring Persian Gulf states.

Speaking in London earlier Wednesday, President Barack Obama called on Saleh to "move immediately" to implement the agreement. Saleh has balked three times at following through on verbal commitments to step down.

The earlier U.S. travel alert for Yemen issued in March had allowed nonessential embassy staff and their families to leave at government expense. It had also urged Americans not to go to Yemen but had only told those al-

ready in the country to consider leaving.

The new alert followed a defiant message from Saleh, who vowed not to step down or allow Yemen to become a "failed state." His stance, combined with renewed fighting, sharply increased chances that Yemen's three-month uprising could turn into a militia-led revolt after Arab mediation failed to crack Saleh's 32-year authoritarian rule.

"I will not leave power and I will not leave Yemen," a spokesman, Ahmed al-Soufi, quoted Saleh as saying.

He also took a direct swipe at U.S.-backed efforts to negotiate his exit. "I don't take orders from outside," said a Saleh's statement, read by the spokesman in a meeting with tribal allies.

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