

McConnell brushes off Pelosi as she finalizes relief package

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Hopes are fading on Capitol Hill for a deal on the next round of coronavirus relief before an approaching Memorial Day recess, raising the prospect that Congress won't clinch a new spending agreement until June or beyond.

While the Democratic-controlled House is aiming to pass a multitrillion-dollar package as soon as this week without GOP or White House input, the Senate Republican majority has no timeline for delivering its own bill. Senate Majority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) said the party is still "assessing what we've done already," referring to the nearly \$3 trillion in aid delivered by Congress thus far.

"I'm in constant communication with the White House and if we decide to go forward we'll go forward together," McConnell told reporters on Monday. "We have not yet felt the urgency of acting immediately. That time could develop, but I don't think it has yet."

The GOP has little regard for Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#)'s legislation and in interviews Republican senators said it does nothing to pressure them to act. Senate Majority Whip [John Thune](#) (R-S.D.) said in an interview the House bill is "more like a messaging document than anything else."

McConnell has offered Republican senators no timeline on the next bill, according to a GOP senator.

The Senate's restrained pace combined with the House's sense of urgency suggests none of the bicameral cooperation needed to craft a massive rescue deal amidst an economic and health crisis. In moments where both parties see a need to act, congressional leaders typically negotiate exhaustively over a period of days or weeks — not follow opposing timetables.

Senate Minority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) has taken to likening the Republican Party's reluctance to move quickly to former President Herbert Hoover, whose hesitation to respond to economic catastrophe helped usher in the Great Depression.

House Democrats are “moving really fast and big and bold. And Leader McConnell hasn’t done anything,” Schumer said Monday. “The American people will be very much behind the kind of big, bold solution that the House is proposing.”

The last \$484 billion bill, [H.R. 266 \(116\)](#), the fourth in a series of massive aid packages totaling nearly \$3 trillion, was driven by the depletion of funds for the Paycheck Protection Program in April. But demand for that program has slowed, and its popularity has waned among lawmakers in both parties because of reports of money going to big companies and universities with large endowments.

So even if the new \$310 billion in funding for the Paycheck Protection Program is expended in the coming weeks, there’s no guarantee it will force Republicans to the table.

Still, if the House is able to pass legislation in the next week it will amount to a challenge to a Senate GOP that’s considering leaving for a weeklong recess for Memorial Day during the last week of May. And some Republicans said the party is feeling more urgency than it was just a few weeks ago.

“It’s hard for people to wrap their heads around it,” said Sen. [Josh Hawley](#) (R-Mo.), who is advocating for federally subsidizing workers’ salaries to prevent layoffs. “I’m hearing a lot more of my colleagues say: ‘What are we going to do about jobs?’ I think people are getting there.”

After Republicans openly dismissed Pelosi’s plan for a fifth bill, the speaker made no effort to negotiate with the GOP at the outset. Instead, Pelosi has been working to cull down a lengthy list of Democratic wants into what’s expected to be a partisan proposal that receives little, if any, Republican support.

And even that has proved difficult — the initial timeline for finishing the House bill has slipped since last week as rank-and-file Democrats lobby leadership to include their ideas. As a result, the draft bill has ballooned, with some Democrats whispering it could cost close to \$3 trillion when finished.

“At this point there’s still negotiations just within the Democratic Party on what should be in this bill. Last week we were posed with the question: Should we go big?” Rep. [Kim Schrier](#) (D-Wash.) said in an interview. “The general consensus was ‘go big’ and put in what we believe in and then the pressure is on Republicans to explain why they’re not supporting [our proposals].”

The measure is expected to include more than \$1 trillion in aid for state and local governments, in addition to expanding food assistance and money for mail-in voting, among other things.

Democratic aides insist they're working to pare back the costs before releasing the final proposal, saying that it will likely cost somewhere around \$2 trillion, an eye popping figure that is sure to be mocked by Republicans.

On a private caucus call Monday, Pelosi said it's up to Democrats to "build our environment" through public sentiment to give their bill momentum.

"The sooner we act, the bigger we go, the better," Pelosi told Democrats.

The Senate Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing this week on liability reform, the GOP's main demand for the next piece of legislation. But otherwise, the party has not yet coalesced around a large vision.

And in an inauspicious sign, Sen. [Lamar Alexander](#) (R-Tenn.) will now stay home in Tennessee after a staffer tested positive for coronavirus. The senator tested negative for coronavirus last week. Alexander is the chairman of the Senate's primary health committee, which would conceivably play a role in an coronavirus legislation.

Privately, several House Democrats concede their latest bill feels like little more than an effort to appease the most liberal members of the caucus, many of whom were chafed that their most important priorities were minimized or ignored entirely in previous coronavirus negotiations.

Democrats say they expect the House to come into session and pass their relief package along party lines, either this Friday or even sometime next week. And then it's likely lawmakers will return home to their districts, at least until after Memorial Day.

Gone is the unified sense of urgency in both parties that characterized the initial coronavirus negotiations as the mysterious virus rapidly spread throughout the country, shuttering U.S. businesses and sending the economy into freefall.

Now, not everyone agrees that the answer is providing billions — if not trillions — of more federal dollars in relief, even as unemployment numbers soar into the tens of millions, food bank lines stretch for miles and the coronavirus death toll surpasses 80,000 Americans. The debate about how to stabilize the economy and take steps toward resuming normal life has taken on a much more partisan veneer in recent weeks. Republican leaders have [seized on the defiant energy](#) mobilizing hard-line conservatives, with several GOP governors moving to reopen their states against the advice of health experts.

And senior Democrats say when the House does return after Memorial Day, it will be time to turn to the legislative season's pressing matters — spending bills, the annual defense policy legislation and reauthorizing water infrastructure programs.

In the meantime, House leaders are promising at least 72-hours notice before lawmakers are due back in Washington to vote on the next round of relief funds. But the three-day heads up isn't just for travel reasons, House Majority Leader [Steny Hoyer](#) told Democrats on a private call Monday.

“This is a very large bill, and we will have to talk to our members about it and see where the votes are,” Hoyer said, according to Democrats on the call.
