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WASHINGTON UPDATE

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CONGRESS READY TO PUNT FY 2017 SPENDING DECISIONS UNTIL NEXT YEAR

Current federal funding for FY 2017, which began on October 1, is set to expire at midnight on December 9. In the wake of last week's elections, the immediate challenge for congressional Republicans was whether to finish the FY 2017 budget process while President Obama is still in office or wait a couple of months until President-elect Donald Trump takes over the reins of power. After hearing from Trump's presidential transition team, Speaker Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell will be moving another short-term continuing resolution through March 2017. The argument on behalf of this position is rather straight forward and reflects the new power structure in our nation's capital. On January 20, Republicans will control the White House and both chambers of Congress, ensuring a dominant legislative position in implementing their spending and policy priorities for this current fiscal year, which began on October 1. Democrats on Capitol Hill would have much preferred to finish the spending package now while they can still leverage the power of a Democratic president. Democrats now face the unenviable task of having to fight rear guard actions on behalf of their budgetary priorities as Congress deliberates on emergency funding for hurricane and flood relief in Louisiana, North Carolina, Florida and other states and funding for Flint's lead poisoning debacle and the opioid epidemic gripping many regions of the country

EARMARKS MANEUVERS ON THE HILL

During the Republican Conference debate on adopting the House rules for the next Congress, Speaker Paul Ryan was compelled to pull a couple of proposed amendments to ease if not rescind the earmark moratorium out of concern that one if not more of the amendments would be adopted. In exchange for postponing the votes, Ryan committed to review the earmark ban in the first quarter of 2017. GOP members of the conference voiced their frustrations about ceding too much spending authority to the legislative branch of government. While well intentioned, the earmark moratorium, it was argued, is too broad in scope and needs to be revised to allow congressional designated spending to states and local governments as well as in areas covering the US Army Corps of Engineers, Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, the Bureau of Reclamation. Representative Tom Cole (R-OK), a senior member of the Appropriations Committee, said of earmarks, "...it's a helpful lubricant to the system. It's a way to take care of problems. Bureaucracies don't always see the problems."

HOUSE AND SENATE LEADERSHIP ELECTIONS FOR 115TH CONGRESS

Earlier this week, the House Republicans re-elected their leadership team with Paul Ryan (R-WI) as Speaker, Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) as Majority Leader and Steve Scalise (R-LA) as Majority Whip. On the Senate side, Mitch McConnell (R-KY) will continue to serve as Majority Leader and John Cornyn (R-TX) was re-elected to another term as Majority Whip. For Senate Democrats, Chuck Schumer (D-NY) replaces retiring Senator Harry Reid as Minority Leader and Dick Durbin (D-IL) will continue to serve as Minority Whip. In an effort to widen the diversity of the leadership team, Senator Schumer has created policy and communications slots for Senators Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), the first openly elected lesbian in the US Senate. House Democrats will hold their leadership elections on November 30. The big news here is Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) is being challenged by Tim Ryan, a seven-term congressman from the state of Ohio.

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