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WASHINGTON UPDATE

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CONGRESS SLIP-SLIDING TOWARD A GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

Congressional Republican leaders are struggling to come up with a funding strategy that avoids a government shutdown at the end of the month. The basic challenge confronting Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) is how to deal with 31 House Freedom Caucus members – the most conservative wing of his GOP conference – who have vowed to vote against any government funding measure that contains money for Planned Parenthood. Simply put, with 247 House Republicans, Boehner cannot afford the defection of 31 of his GOP colleagues and still expect to pass a stopgap funding bill along a party-line vote. In an effort to diffuse the situation, the House earlier today passed by a vote of 241 to 187 legislation to defund Planned Parenthood. The bill is not tied to a continuing resolution funding the federal government and therefore does not threaten a shutdown. Whether this vote is enough to appease the House Freedom Caucus faction has yet to be determined.

Boehner, of course, always maintains the option of passing a continuing resolution that defunds Planned Parenthood, keeping his conference largely intact. While such a measure wouldn't stand a chance of passing the Senate, it could very well push Congress to the precipice of a government shutdown. One exit strategy under consideration is using reconciliation next year, a procedural process that is filibuster proof – requiring only 51 votes to pass the Senate. Such a move might be enough to satisfy House Freedom Caucus demands by guaranteeing that a provision defunding Planned Parenthood would in fact make it to the President's desk. As Boehner works through his legislative options, federal employees, defense and federal contractors along with the public at large can only hope that Congress and the White House don't back themselves into another government shutdown.

FAA REAUTHORIZATION ON HOLD

With less than two weeks before the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) authorization expires, the chairmen of the committees of jurisdiction are working on another short-term extension that may last up to six months. House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-KY) announced yesterday that a short-term FAA extension will be hitched to a continuing resolution that is likely to be considered later this month keeping the federal government afloat past September 30. Chairman Shuster of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee expressed his continued interest in reporting an FAA authorization bill by the end of the year. However, the measure may take a back seat to the ongoing challenges of enacting a long-term surface transportation bill. One of the hot button issues under review is Chairman

Shuster initiative to privatize the functions of the Air Traffic Control system, putting it into a federally chartered, not-for-profit organization. Other areas of concern include the cost-overruns and problematic roll out of NextGen, the FAA's new navigation system.

ANTI-IRAN SENATE VOTES

As part of the series of congressional skirmishes over the Iran nuclear deal, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) once again failed this past Thursday to secure enough votes to thwart a Democratic filibuster on an amendment conditioning lifting US sanctions until the Iranian government releases American prisoners/hostages and recognizes the State of Israel. The vote on the McConnell amendment was 53 to 45, seven votes shy of the 60 votes needed to break the filibuster. Under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, Congress had until September 17 to vote against the deal. Now that the deadline has passed without congressional action, Senate parliamentary maneuvers surrounding the deal are likely to cease. According to Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), the Republican controlled House plans to continue to challenge the President on this issue, both legislatively and through the courts.

OPM WARNS OF BLIZZARD LIKE CONDITIONS IN DC NEXT WEEK

In preparation for Pope Francis's historic visit to our nation's capital next week, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is directing federal employees who work in DC to treat the Pope's stay as they would a "winter blizzard." OPM is encouraging federal employees to use liberal leave or to telecommute during the Pope's three-day visit. City leaders expect hundreds of thousands of people to flock to Washington, DC. There will be major road closures around Capitol Hill, the White House and downtown DC. The Metro system, moreover, is expected to be stretched to the limit.

Pope Francis will be at the White House on September 23 and then move around the City streets in his Popemobile. On Thursday, September 24, Pope Francis will be speaking before a joint meeting of Congress which means security on the Hill will be extraordinarily tight. Things are expected to return to normal on Friday, September 25.