

Bill to fund US government stalls in Congress

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A stopgap “continuing resolution” bill to provide funds for the US federal government when the new fiscal year begins October 1 stalled in the Senate Tuesday in a dispute between Democrats and Republicans over the inclusion of \$220 million toward the cost of upgrading the water system in Flint, Michigan.

Also involved is wrangling over a proposed \$1.1 billion allocation for health measures to fight the Zika epidemic in Puerto Rico and South Florida.

The Democrats are insisting that the funds for Flint be allocated as part of the bill extending current federal funding levels through December 9. Alternately, they are demanding that a provision in the continuing resolution allocating \$500 million for floods that occurred last month in Louisiana be deleted, on the grounds of evenhandedness.

If no funding bill is passed by midnight Friday, September 30, federal agencies will be forced to close down just weeks before the national election. However, that outcome is considered unlikely. There are proposals to allocate the money to aid Flint and other communities with lead-poisoned water in a separate water projects measure to be voted on by the lame duck Congress after the November election. The Senate has already passed such a measure, but the House version does not include money for Flint.

The continuing resolution failed by a large margin to receive the 60 votes needed to end debate and proceed to an up-or-down vote on the Senate floor. Only 45 senators voted to end debate, while 55 voted against the procedural motion. Four Democratic senators bucked the Democratic leadership and voted to end debate. Thirteen Republicans voted against the motion, which was backed by the Republican Senate leadership.

There is a huge element of election-eve political theater and posturing in the maneuvering over the funding measure. The Democrats, in particular, are

attempting to present themselves as defenders of the people of Flint, the Michigan city devastated by General Motors plant closures where the entire water supply was polluted with lead, with untold health consequences for tens of thousands of working class residents.

In fact, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party have done virtually nothing to address the health crisis in Flint or provide the resources needed to rebuild the city’s water supply system. The sum of \$220 million is a drop in the bucket compared to the real cost of making the water system safe. Flint has yet to receive any federal funding.

Negotiations over the stop-gap bill have dragged along for weeks due to disagreements surrounding policy riders attached by the Republicans. The bill had included right-wing provisions banning a Planned Parenthood affiliate in Puerto Rico from receiving federal grants to fight the Zika virus, allowing large corporations to secretly funnel money into political campaigns, and blocking the transfer of responsibility for overseeing Internet domain names from the US government to an international body. These provisions were dropped after opposition from Democrats and a number of Republicans whose main concern was continuing military funding without a hitch.

The thirteen Republican senators who voted against the procedural motion on Tuesday are demanding that these provisions be restored.

The Republican Party, pointing to the Democrats’ intransigence, claims that there is no money for both the water infrastructure package and the flood aid package, pitting flood victims against lead-poisoning victims. The \$500 million in flood relief touted by the Republicans is negligible compared to the \$8.7 billion in damage caused by floods in the state of Louisiana, let alone the damage done in West Virginia and Maryland.



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