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POLITICS

Senate Approves Roughly \$2 Trillion in Coronavirus Relief

Legislation to provide direct payments to many Americans, expand unemployment insurance, offer health-care providers additional resources

By Joshua Jamerson, Andrew Duehren and Natalie Andrews

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WASHINGTON—The Senate approved the largest economic stimulus package in recent memory, moving the estimated \$2 trillion bill to the House as Congress seeks to give American families and businesses a financial shield against the ravages of the new coronavirus pandemic.

Senators approved the legislation 96-0, with four senators absent, after round-the-clock negotiations between the Trump administration and leading senators. Following precipitous declines, investors in the past two days have sent U.S. stocks soaring in anticipation of the bill's passage. President Trump has said he would sign it immediately.

Steny Hoyer (D., Md.), the House majority leader, said late Wednesday that the House would consider the stimulus bill on Friday.

If passed, the new law would provide loans and other disbursements to a wide swath of the economy, including direct payments to Americans and loans to large and small companies.

The bill also greatly expands unemployment insurance to cover freelance and gig workers, refills drained state coffers and extends additional resources to health-care providers.

“A fight has arrived on our shores,” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said on the Senate floor, where he likened the measure to “wartime investment.” He added: “We did not seek it. We did not want it. But now, we are going to win it.”

Mr. McConnell and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) sought to pass the bill swiftly, but passage by unanimous consent was slowed after rank-and-file members voiced objections while lawmakers were completing the bill’s full text.

Republican lawmakers protested the unemployment provisions in the bill, and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.), a Democratic presidential candidate, said he would slow the bill if the group of Republicans didn’t withdraw their threat, creating a high-stakes standoff in the final stages of the negotiations.

Some House Democrats have said the Senate package doesn’t go far enough.

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) told reporters Wednesday that she expects the House to debate the legislation on the floor, a shift from previous statements in which she said she wanted to pass it by unanimous consent, a nearly unheard of process for such a large piece of legislation that could be blocked by one lawmaker.

“Republicans have told us that’s not possible from their side,” to pass it by unanimous consent, she said. “This is a \$2 trillion bill, I would like to see good debate on the floor.”



Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer joined his Republican counterpart in efforts to smooth the bill's passage.

PHOTO: STEFANI REYNOLDS/ZUMA PRESS

The House is likely to pass it by a voice vote, where members call out “Aye” or “No” and not a roll-call vote where names are recorded. That option allows members who are present to register dissent, but the bill could still be passed based on a vote of those in Washington and allow those wary of returning to stay home.

The legislation will provide one-time checks of \$1,200 to Americans with adjusted gross income up to \$75,000 for individuals and \$150,000 for married couples. Individuals and couples are eligible for an additional \$500 per child. The government rebates will be pared by \$5 for each \$100 of income over those thresholds, completely phasing out for individuals whose incomes exceed \$99,000, \$146,500 for head of households with one child, and \$198,000 for joint filers who don't have children.

Eligible U.S. residents must have a work-eligible Social Security number to receive such a check and must not be claimed as a dependent by another taxpayer, according to Senate documents. Unlike an earlier proposal crafted by Senate Republicans, the payments won't be set at a lower level for some low-income Americans.

The checks will be available to those who have no income as well as people who rely on income benefit programs, such as supplemental security income from the Social Security Administration.

Those payments would be in addition to a broad expansion in unemployment benefits, which would be extended to nontraditional employees, including gig workers and freelancers. The agreement is set to increase current unemployment assistance by \$600 a week for four months.

The legislation hit a snag on Wednesday when a group of Senate Republicans attempted to amend the legislation to remove the \$600 extra weekly payment for those receiving unemployment insurance because it could result in people getting more money while out of work than they did in their jobs.

“This bill pays you more not to work than if you were working,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.). He, along with a few others, tried to amend the legislation.

The \$600 across-the-board increase was a bipartisan agreement, reached several days ago and was done because every state has a different unemployment program and creating a plan for each state would take too much time, aides from both parties said.

“Some workers, some, may end up coming out ahead. I’m not going to stand here and say that I feel badly about that,” Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.). “Let’s give them that helping hand and not apologize for it for a minute.”

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Does this stimulus package address the issues that concern you? Join the conversation below.

The stimulus package included \$350 billion in loans to small businesses in an effort to keep Americans on payrolls as economic activity across the country comes to a standstill. Under the new program, loan money that small businesses use to cover payroll expenses, rent, interest on mortgage obligations and utilities will be forgiven. The legislation would also provide billions in debt relief on existing loans.

A major challenge in the negotiations was \$500 billion in corporate aid, much of which will go toward backstopping Federal Reserve loans. The Treasury secretary will have the authority to directly lend a slice of those funds, and Democrats had sought to place controls on the money. The agreement will create a new inspector general and oversight board to monitor the aid.

The corporate aid portion also includes \$17 billion for assistance to companies deemed to be crucial to national security, which could include firms such as Boeing Co. and General Electric Co.

“We didn’t seek and don’t have plans to request funds from this provision,” a GE spokeswoman said.

“You can imagine there’s an awful lot of companies that can qualify for that,” Sen. Pat Toomey (R., Pa.) said about that national-security fund, adding it shouldn’t be thought of as specifically for Boeing.

Boeing has been seeking at least \$60 billion in public and private aid for itself, its suppliers and the broader aerospace industry.

The legislation also would give grants of \$25 billion for passenger air carriers, \$4 billion for air-cargo carriers and \$3 billion for contractors. The money is on top of loans and loan guarantees available through the Treasury. The airlines had sought such direct grants but initially had been rebuffed by Republicans.

The legislation will also create a new grant program to send \$100 billion to health-care providers, already straining to respond to the rising number of infections across the country. An additional \$16 billion will go toward building a stockpile of medical equipment, including personal protective gear that has become scarce.



An aide brings the bill to the U.S. Senate chamber.

PHOTO: ERIK S LESSER/SHUTTERSTOCK

Expanded telehealth, higher Medicare reimbursement for doctors and hospitals, and a delay in certain Medicaid cuts to hospitals are part of the coronavirus package focused on health-care needs during the crisis.

The package would ensure states can get a 6.2% increase in matching federal funds for Medicaid and delay scheduled reductions to hospitals that care for a large share of uninsured or low-income patients. Payments hospitals get for treating patients infected with the virus would also be increased by 20%.

Democrats said the bill includes \$150 billion to go directly to state and local governments saddled with costs related to the virus.

In a heated call with House lawmakers from his home state, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said that the state would get only \$4 billion in direct aid as part of a package giving \$150 billion to states, according to a person familiar with the call. He argued that state funding should be higher and that a separate pool of money in addition to direct state aid should be available for cities, given that deaths in New York City alone account for about a quarter of the country's total. Under the bill, any money sought by an individual city would reduce the amount available to the rest of the state.

Democrats also secured a provision that bans businesses controlled by Mr. Trump, the vice president, members of Congress and heads of executive departments from receiving loans or other funds from the stimulus bill. Children and spouses of those people are also banned, according to a senior Democratic aide.

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