

Federal government shuts down

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Congress plunged the nation into a partial government shutdown Tuesday, Oct. 1 as a protracted dispute over President Barack Obama's signature health care law reached a boiling point, forcing some 800,000 federal workers off the job.

Obama readied a midday statement to the nation Tuesday as Democrats and Republicans maintained their blame-each-other duel on Capitol Hill. Even as Obama prepared to meet with citizens signing up for his health care program and then make a lunch-hour speech in the Rose Garden, the White House cut back to a skeletal staff.

The U.S. Capitol canceled tours not personally led by Congress members. "Closed" signs and barricades sprang up at the Lincoln Memorial, and national parks and federal workplaces across the country were following suit.

In Phillips County, this called for the closure of the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service offices at 1280 SW Interocean Dr.

President Obama responds

President Obama said House Republicans have shut down the federal government over an "ideological crusade" against his health care law.

Obama spoke in the Rose Garden on the first day of the government shutdown. He said the longer the shutdown continues, the worse the impact will be.

The president said Republicans should not be able to hold the entire economy "hostage." He is urging them to reopen the government quickly and allow furloughed federal employees to go

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back to work.

The government shut down because Congress did not pass a funding bill ahead of Monday's midnight deadline for the end of the 2013 fiscal year.

Earlier Tuesday, Obama sent federal workers a letter lamenting that they had become "punching bags" in Washington's partisan fiscal fights.

Obama said that if the shutdown continues, it will make it more difficult to recruit talented people for government jobs.

Last effort made to avoid shutdown

Hours before the shutdown at midnight Monday night, the Republican House voted 228-201 to tie government funding to a delay in the health plan.

This was the House's third proposal in two weeks. It sought to delay enforcement of the individual mandate in the Affordable Care Act, which requires all Americans to obtain health insurance.

The Democratic-led Senate rejected the measure.

With the House's failure to accept a spending bill that doesn't delay the health initiative or find an alternative acceptable to the Senate, a federal government shutdown resulted.

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Monday night, President Obama did sign legislation that would ensure that members of the armed forces would continue to get paid during the shutdown. The House passed the legislation last weekend and it was approved by the Senate Monday.

The mere prospect of a shutdown contributed to a decline in stock markets around the world and U.S. stock futures fell sharply.

Some critical services will continue in the shutdown, such as patrolling the borders, inspecting meat and controlling air traffic, and health care programs for the poor and elderly.

The State Department will continue processing foreign applications for visas, and embassies and consulates overseas will continue to provide services to American citizens.

Since the last government shutdown 17 years ago, temporary funding bills have been noncontroversial, with neither party willing to chance a shutdown to achieve legislative goals it couldn't otherwise win.

But with the 3-year-old health care law nearing implementation, hardcore tea party conservatives were determined to use the spending bill as leverage to derail Obama's chief domestic accomplishment.

The health care overhaul, which has come to be known as "Obamacare," is aimed at providing health coverage for millions of uninsured Americans. Exchanges opened Tuesday under the law where people can shop for health care coverage from private insurers.

Republicans insisted the initiative is already costing jobs and will drive up health care costs. Democrats argued otherwise and accused Republicans of holding a routine funding measure hostage to unfairly extract concessions.

The battle started with a House vote to pass the short-term funding bill with a provision that

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would have defunded implementation of the health care overhaul. The Senate voted along party lines to strip that out and lobbed the measure back to the House.

A House measure that passed early Sunday by a near party-line vote of 231-192 sent back to the Senate two key changes: a one-year delay of key provisions of the health insurance law and repeal of a new tax on medical devices that partially funds it, steps that still go too far for the White House and its Democratic allies.

Senate rules often make it difficult to act quickly, but the chamber can act on the House's latest proposals by simply calling them up and killing them on a non-debatable motion.

Even some Republicans said privately they feared that Democratic Senate leader Harry Reid held the advantage.

Republicans argued that they had already made compromises; for instance, their latest measure would have left intact most parts of the health care law that have taken effect, including requiring insurance companies to cover people with pre-existing conditions and to let families' plans cover children up to age 26. They also would have allowed insurers to deny contraception coverage based on religious or moral objections.

Prior to the Monday midnight deadline, Democrats were confident they could hold firm, and some more senior Republicans acknowledged that the situation was rife with political risk for their party.

A leading Senate moderate called on her fellow Republicans to back down.

"I disagree with the strategy of linking Obamacare with the continuing functioning of government—a strategy that cannot possibly work," said Sen. Susan Collins of Maine.

AP news reports contributed to this story.

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