Congressional Outlook

Week of December 8th

This week Congress will focus on passing a spending bill that would finance the government through the end of FY 2015. Lawmakers face a December 11 deadline, which is the date the current Continuing Resolution (CR) expires, to do so. Any delay would risk a partial government shutdown. The likely resolution is being called a "CRomnibus," a unique mix between a CR and an omnibus appropriations bill. The CRomnibus will combine a short-term spending bill for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with eleven individual appropriations bills that fund the majority of federal departments through the end of FY 2015. Since the CRomnibus will only fund the Department of DHS for a few months, conservatives will be able to revisit the legislation after Republicans take control of the Senate. It remains unclear whether the CRomnibus will include some controversial policy riders that are included in the House appropriations bills.

On Monday, the Senate is set to approve the FY 2015 National Defense Authorization bill. The bill would establish a spending cap on the agency of $521 billion in base discretionary for Department of Defense activities and $64 billion for overseas contingency operations. The measure was passed in the House Thursday by a vote of 300-19.

The Senate will also take on a tax extenders package that would extend 50 currently expired tax breaks. The House passed its version last week. The Senate will aim to pass these extensions before they leave for winter recess at the end of the week.

These issues remain the top legislative priorities for Congress before adjourning for the year. Adjournment by both chambers is tentatively scheduled for the end of this week.

Week in Review
Bill Cassidy Defeats Mary Landrieu in Senate Runoff Election

Mary Landrieu, the Democratic Senator from Louisiana, was defeated by Representative Bill Cassidy (R) in a runoff election on Saturday. Bill Cassidy, who was elected to the House of Representatives in 2009, received 55% of the vote, and Mary Landrieu 44%. In the general election, Landrieu and Cassidy had also competed against Tea Party-backed Republican candidate Rob Maness, who received 13.8% of the vote. While Landrieu received the plurality of the vote at 42% (versus Cassidy's 41%) in the general election, this was short of the required majority, necessitating the runoff. Landrieu, who had held her Senate seat since first elected in 1996, was the only remaining Democratic Senator from the Deep South, though she had a reputation as one of the most conservative Democrats in the chamber. Preceding the runoff, she had attempted to pass legislation approving construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline, a move intended to show her influence as Chair of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee; the measure fell just one short of the 60 votes needed to pass.

With Cassidy's victory, Republicans will now hold 54 seats in the Senate when the 114th Congress convenes next year.

House to Vote on California Drought Bill This Week Without Senate/Administration Support

A last minute effort to enact legislation to help deal with the current historic drought plaguing the State of California will gain a floor vote in the House this week. H.R. 5781 was introduced by a group of California Republicans in the House last week to provide short-term (18-month) relief to water users south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta in the form of allowing increased pumping from the Delta, and added flexibility in managing water transfers and reservoir releases for water quality and fisheries in order to maximize water storage in reservoirs. The bill is likely to pass the House, but has attracted opposition from environmental groups, California's Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and a veto threat from the White House. It remains to be seen what drought provisions from the bill, if any, will be included in the CROmnibus spending package slated to be considered this week. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), who stopped negotiations with the House on a longer term drought bill earlier last month, had included some drought provisions in the draft FY2015 Energy and Water Appropriations bill produced by the subcommittee she chairs.

EPA to Hold WIFIA Listening Session in Washington D.C.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is convening an information and stakeholder input session in Washington, DC today. The purpose of the session is to discuss implementation of the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act of 2014 (WIFIA). WIFIA is an innovative financing mechanism for water-related infrastructure of national or regional significance, and was signed into law on June 11, 2014. EPA will be providing an overview of the statute, assistance options and terms, and suggesting ideas for implementing the program. Participants are likely to discuss project ideas and potential selection criteria; opportunities, challenges and questions about implementation; and future stakeholder engagement. The intended audience is municipal, state and regional utility decision makers; private finance sector representatives; and other interested organizations and parties. Also, in previous listening sessions, EPA has indicated they were drafting a White Paper on WIFIA implementation, which would be distributed for public comment.
Transportation Reauthorization an Early Priority for the New Congress

The Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee is expected to start moving on a five year reauthorization of the federal aid highway program bill early in the next Congress. Incoming EPW Chair, Inhofe, has already voiced his intention to prioritize passage of this bill from his committee. Because several new members are expected to join the EPW Committee with the start of the new Congress, next year's bill is expected to look different than what was approved this year under Senator Boxer's leadership. Next month Chairman Inhofe plans to release an overall strategy for moving the bill through committee.

Currently, highway and transit programs are operating under an extension that expires at the end of May. Although the EPW panel unanimously approved a long-term renewal for highway programs this spring, that legislation is effectively dead because the other Senate committees with jurisdiction over the bill did not complete their work on their pieces of the bill.

House Votes to Bar Categorical Exemptions from Deportation

In a largely symbolic measure, the House of Representatives passed the Preventing Executive Overreach on Immigration Act, a bill introduced by Ted Yoho (R-FL) that would prevent the President from granting categorical exemptions from deportation to unauthorized immigrants. The Senate is not expected to take up the bill, reportedly introduced by House leadership to appease the conservative wing of House Republicans. Read more...

Congressional Schedule

Tuesday, December 9

- House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Disability-Assistance and Memorial Affairs hearing on “Reviewing Current Operations of our National Cemeteries.
- Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism hearing to examine campus sexual assault, focusing on the roles and responsibilities of law enforcement.
- Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development hearing to examine inequality, opportunity, and the housing market.
- Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights hearing to examine the state of civil and human rights in the United States.

Wednesday, December 10

- House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Subcommittee on Aviation hearing on "U.S. Unmanned Aircraft Systems: Integration Oversight and Competitiveness."
• House Energy and Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Health hearing on "Examining FDA's Role in the Regulation of Genetically Modified Food Ingredients."
• House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security hearing on "The Impact on Local Communities of the Release of Unaccompanied Minors and the Need for Consultation and Notification."
• Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety, and Security hearing to examine passenger rail, focusing on investing in our nation's future.

Thursday, December 11

• House Veterans' Affairs Full Committee hearing "Evaluating federal and Community Efforts to Eliminate Veteran Homelessness."