

The House is expected as early as Wednesday to consider a record \$118.7 billion spending measure to fund the Veterans Affairs Department and military construction projects in fiscal 2009.

House action on the bill (HR 6599) indicates a symbolic thaw in the annual appropriations process, which has been frozen for weeks due to a partisan squabble over energy legislation. Democratic leaders have said more appropriations legislation, including the Defense spending bill, can be expected on the floor in September.

"We'll just put [the Military Construction – VA bill] up and see if people behave responsibly," said House Appropriations Chairman David R. Obey, D-Wis.

The appropriations process has been stalled in the House since June 26, when Obey halted work on the spending bills after a partisan flight over oil drilling broke out at a markup.

The Military Construction-VA bill would provide \$72.7 billion in discretionary spending which is \$8.8 billion more than the amount provided in fiscal 2008 and \$3.4 billion more than President Bush requested, according to the House Appropriations Committee.

House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer, D-Md., said the bill would be considered under an open rule, allowing members to introduce amendments without restriction. He also said there will be a requirement that all amendments be filed before the bill goes to the floor.

"Our thought is that both sides should have notice of what amendments will be considered," Hoyer said.

John Campbell, R-Calif., and Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., plan to offer an amendment that would strike all 103 member-sponsored earmarks from the bill. It is likely to fail.

Zach Wamp of Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the Military Construction-VA Appropriations Subcommittee, said there was bipartisan agreement on the urgent need to move

the bill. "I don't see any conflicts on the floor at all," Wamp said.

Big Boosts in Vets' Health Care

The bill would provide roughly \$47.7 billion in discretionary spending and \$46 billion in mandatory funding for the VA. About \$24.8 billion in discretionary funding would be provided for military construction, family housing, and base realignment and closure.

The funding includes almost \$200 million for additional troop housing for Army and Marine Corps trainees.

The bill would also provide \$241 million for related agencies such as the American Battle Monuments Commission and the Armed Forces Retirement Home.

The committee agreed to significant increases in funding for veterans' health care. Appropriators included \$40.7 billion for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), which is \$1.6 billion more than Bush's request and \$3.8 billion above 2008 funding, according to the committee.

Initiatives approved as part of the VHA funding include:

- \$568 million to increase by 10 percent the enrollment of Priority 8 veterans, those of at least moderate income who have no service-related disability.
- \$300 million to address non-recurring maintenance needs at medical facilities.
- \$200 million to increase access to fee-based care for veterans who live far from veterans' hospitals.

- \$1.6 billion for new prosthetics.
- \$58 million to restore a cut from research in trauma, mental health and other areas.
- \$50 million to raise the mileage reimbursement rate for veterans who commute to VA facilities, to 35 cents per mile from 28.5 cents per mile.

The spending measure would also provide at least \$3.8 billion for specialty mental health services and \$584 million for substance abuse programs.

The bill would provide \$2 billion for VA construction projects, or roughly \$1.1 billion more than requested. The additional money would fund six major construction projects and 145 minor ones that can be completed in fiscal 2009.