

President Barack Obama is flooding Capitol Hill with top members of his economic team as he tries to sell his \$3.8 trillion budget plan to Congress. But it remains to be seen whether his efforts will win over lawmakers increasingly worried about record deficits.

Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orszag led the way Tuesday, kicking off a marathon series of House and Senate hearings on the budget this week. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and Defense Secretary Robert Gates were also on the Hill answering questions about the budget.

Obama, meanwhile, hit the road Tuesday for a town hall meeting in Nashua, N.H., to tout small-business initiatives in his budget. He is slated to visit Las Vegas later this month and, in the weeks ahead, will be touring the country to “speak to Americans firsthand about the impact of the economy on their community,” according to a White House aide.

The president will “continue to travel to communities and businesses across the country and discuss with Americans from all walks of life his top domestic policy priority: creating jobs,” the aide said.

Obama is also set to address the Senate Democratic Caucus today during its issues conference.

But his coordinated sales pitch hit resistance Tuesday as Republicans and Democrats alike peppered Orszag with complaints about an unprecedented \$9 trillion ocean of red ink over the coming decade. The president’s proposal to freeze some domestic spending — a plan that would hit many Members’ favorite programs — appeared to do little to assuage concerns about the deficit.

Senate Budget Chairman Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) generally praised the short-term budget proposals but said he has “strong disagreement” with the levels of debt in the president’s 10-year plan.

"I believe we're on an unsustainable course," he said. "It has to be addressed, and the president's 10-year outlook, I don't think, is the path that we can take as a nation."

Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), the ranking member on the Budget Committee, was far harsher. "Let's stop putting forward budgets like this, which represent a death certificate for the American dream for our kids," Gregg said.

But Orszag defended the budget blueprint, saying that it would shrink the deficit over the next decade and that the administration was proposing a host of belt-tightening measures. "You don't get \$1.2 trillion in deficit reduction, more than any administration has proposed in more than a decade, without making lots of hard choices," Orszag told the House Budget Committee.

However, Orszag acknowledged that the budget failed to put the country on a sustainable path.

"That's why we need a fiscal commission," Orszag said, brandishing the idea proposed by Conrad and Gregg but rejected by the Senate last week.

That had Republicans pouncing.

"He needs a commission to tell him what to do?" Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.) asked. "The president can't come up with his own ideas? ... Why doesn't the president do that instead of saying 'I don't know what to do here.'"

Orszag said that publishing a list of proposals with no chance of passing Congress would be meaningless and that the only way to deal with the debt problem is in a bipartisan way.

Gregg said he hopes the Senate will reconsider his and Conrad's proposal for a bipartisan fiscal commission with fast-track authority, expressing doubts whether a commission appointed by the president would get anywhere.

Freshman Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.), meanwhile, questioned Obama's plans for more spending on job creation: "If the stimulus is working, and I think it is, why do we need another jobs bill?"

Orszag said jobs are still lagging behind economic growth.

Connolly, who is president of the freshman Democratic class and voted against the House jobs package in December, said earlier that the \$1.6 trillion deficit tied to Obama's budget is "not going to fly" with most lawmakers.

"Frankly, I'm pessimistic about this budget," Connolly said. What Obama should be doing to rein in costs, he said, is throwing his weight behind "saving health care."

"Health care reform will have a lot to do with long-term budgets. This budget he just submitted assumes certain things with respect to health care being in place and the savings through that. To me, that's more important than defending any particular budget document," Connolly said.

Meanwhile, House Democratic leaders sought to divert attention from the red ink in Obama's budget by pointing to proposals by Republicans to cut spending on Social Security and Medicare.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen (Md.), chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said proposals from GOP Reps. Jeb Hensarling (Texas) and Paul Ryan (Wis.) amounted to "Groundhog Day."

"The American people simply cannot afford to let Republicans take us back to the failed policies of George W. Bush that would privatize Social Security," Van Hollen said.

Ryan, however, said his proposal would balance the budget, something Obama's plan would not achieve by itself.

"I think the president would serve himself well if he put out a budget that actually tackled these challenges rather than punting it to a partisan commission," Ryan told reporters.

Others urged Obama to make fiscal responsibility his top priority, regardless of complaints by Democrats that funds would have to be cut for key domestic programs.

Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) said Obama should wield his veto power — something he threatened in his State of the Union address.

"That was the right thing to say. It rankled some members of our party, but it's in the national interest," Bayh said. "That would have a restraining impact on Congress, which is necessary, and the American people would be pleasantly surprised."

Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said Obama's plan to freeze discretionary nonmilitary spending is "the right thing, generally." Still, he added that he wouldn't "sign in blood on that."