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The Military Construction-VA bill (HR 6599) is expected to be considered on the floor July 30, and the Appropriations Defense Subcommittee will mark up its bill the same day. Appropriations Chairman David R. Obey, D-Wis., said the plan is to have the full committee mark up the Defense measure the first week of September and have it on the floor the following week.

“We’ll just put (Military Construction-VA) up, and see if people behave responsibly,” Obey said. “We’ll see next week whether this place is populated by adults or juveniles.”

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

Democratic leaders want to pass both the Military Construction-VA and Defense bills before leaving for the year at the end of September, and the idea of moving those bills has gained favor in recent days.

The Defense Appropriations Subcommittee scheduled the markup of its fiscal 2009 bill after a meeting between top appropriators in both parties, where both sides agreed to put the bill through the regular process and pledged to complete work on the measure in September.

Chairman John P. Murtha, D-Pa., had said that work on the bill was delayed by a lack of floor time and the broader fight between the two parties over the appropriations process.

The subcommittee's ranking Republican, C.W. Bill Young, R-Fla., said Thursday that an agreement to go through the regular order for the Defense bill, but on an accelerated schedule, had been worked out in the meeting, attended by Murtha, Young, Obey, and Jerry Lewis of California, the full committee's ranking Republican.

“Everybody is on board to pass the bill once we get back in September, quickly,” Young said.

It is doubtful that many other of the 12 annual spending bills, if any will be cleared by Congress. Democrats have said they will pass legislation in September funding the government at its current levels until a new president takes office, rather than engage in veto fights with President Bush on the annual spending bills like they did last year.

The Defense or Military Construction-VA bill could be the vehicle for that continuing resolution.

Defense Details □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

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The Defense bill, though not finalized, now includes a pay bonus for soldiers held beyond their enlistment commitments by the Army's stop-loss program since 2001, language encouraging the Pentagon to move quickly to rebid a tanker contract, and a provision pushing the administration to move detainees held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Young said that the subcommittee also has "generally agreed" to abide by the Navy's proposal to halt production of the DDG-1000 destroyer after completion of the two prototype ships currently in production.

The ship has faced delays and cost overruns, and the House Armed Services Committee rejected plans for a third ship in its version of the fiscal 2009 Defense authorization bill (HR 5658). The Senate bill (S3001) would give 42.6 billion for the third ship.

The appropriations bill will not include specific funding for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It will add money for domestic base infrastructure and equipment replacement.

“this bill is dedicated toward today’s and tomorrow’s national defense capabilities,” Young said.

He said Murtha did not want the Defense bill to surface too far ahead of its floor consideration, because that would give lobbyists and defense interests too much time to scrutinize and complain about the measure – an explanation seconded by one of Murtha’s Democratic colleagues.

“We were trying to avoid having it hang out there for too long,” said appropriator James. P. Moran, D-Va. “The leadership said to get it ready, so that’s what we’re doing.”

Obey said the goal is to get it to the Senate quickly, something that will require cooperation from House Republicans.

“We want to give the Senate at least a few days to deal with the bill after it leaves the House, so that requires some procedural waivers by the minority,” he said. “And if that doesn’t happen, we cant get it done.”

The Senate Appropriations panel is waiting for House action before moving its bill.

Smooth Sailing?

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Zach wamp of Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the Military Construction-VA Subcommittee, said he didn’t expect any problems with that bill on the floor, noting the strong support for veterans’ programs.

But Obey has bristled at Republican suggestions that they will offer dozens of amendments to strip earmarks from spending bills and has said it is one reason Democrats have been reluctant

to bring bills to the floor.

John Campbell, R-Calif., said he plans to offer amendments to strip earmarks from the Military Construction-VA measure. He said he does not know how many since the committee report on the bill was just filed and he and his staff have not had time to examine it. He said fellow earmark critic Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., is likely to offer amendments as well.

"I expect we'll be offering some, but frankly we'll have to see what is in there," Campbell said.